KITTY

WARWICK DEEPING

Allen Ross

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By

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CHAPTER I

I

Mrs. St. George looked out into Cardigan Square. The high, Georgian window framed a picture that was seen in winter and in spring, in autumn and in summer, and so familiar had it become to her that it seemed to possess no more than a casual significance. But on this April day, in the year nineteen hundred and eighteen, Mrs. St. George saw the square like a face strange with sudden emotion, or a landscape sad with the young greenness of a wintry spring. Standing in the middle of the room she saw this strip framed by the window, the familiar details, the gradations of the vista, the wood-paved roadway touching the kerb of the flagged path, the black railings of the garden, the young green of sprouting lilacs and privets, the kind of blue-grey gloom hanging in the sooty shrubberies, the thin green of the London grass, the maculated trunks of the old plane-trees, the spread of their tops, the vague redness of the houses beyond, and above it all a square panel of sky. On this April day a south-west wind moved the branches of the plane-trees; sudden sunshine was followed by sudden shadow; the wet trees would glisten or grow black.

"Abominable!"

She uttered the word aloud, and it was a strange word for so cold and so self-contained a woman to utter. She had been standing there for quite five minutes, holding a letter that had changed the familiar sameness of her outlook upon this London square. She was a tall woman, handsome, fiftyish or more, with one of those firm white faces, and lips that close decisively over very regular teeth. Someone had once called her an Arctic Juno. Her

wavy, fair hair had a fallacious softness. Her eyes were very blue.

In a corner, on the right of one of the windows, stood a big bureau, mahogany, capacious and solid. Clara St. George was a woman of affairs, and all her multifarious letters and papers were kept under perfect control. With a deliberate and yet sudden movement she approached her desk, placed her son's letter on the writing-pad, and glanced at a card upon which various telephone numbers were neatly recorded. The telephone was attached to the wall beside her desk. She rang up the exchange. There was something characteristic of her in the way in which she put out a hand and took down the receiver. The gesture was possessive. Always and firmly she had grasped the desired object and uttered decisively the word "mine."

"Exchange—are you there? Give me 10097."

She waited. Her blue eyes looked out at the sudden sunlight in the tops of the plane-trees. She stood very still. Never yet had she allowed her body or her emotions to be hurried.

Her eyes grew more hard and attentive.

"Hallo——! Is that Sir Murray Hurder's? Yes. O, it is you, Sir Murray. Mrs. St. George speaking. I have just heard that they are sending my son out to the front. What? Yes, to France. It's disgraceful. They have passed him as fit. You have known him since he was ten——"

She paused and stood listening, lips pressed to a pale hardness.

"Shocked——? Naturally. It's abominable. What, nothing can be done? Yes, of course, I understand—— This brutal business——"

She hung up the receiver. She glanced at her son's letter which she had placed on the blotting-pad. Her face expressed resentment. For twenty years or so she had possessed her son, and possessed him as she had never possessed his father. He had never escaped from her firm, white hands—and now——! This abominable war had seized him, and after three years of confident security! He had been a delicate child; he was supposed to have a "heart"; he had been given a home-service job with one of the home-service battalions in East Anglia. She had come to regard him as so blessedly unfit and safe.

Those wretched Germans and their March offensive! This exasperating war, with its brutal interferences, its sudden snatching at that which was hers!

She crossed the room and rang the bell, and stood looking out into the familiar square. She was afraid, but she would not let herself acknowledge it. She had been a Smythe, and the Smythes had always stood erect and met life's impertinences with fine composure. And England of 1918 was so full of impertinences, in its shops and its taxis, in its railway-trains, even in the departments of the Inland Revenue.

"Cummins—I expect Mr. Alex to-morrow. He is coming home on leave before going to the front."

Cummins' benign spectacles glimmered. She had known Mr. Alex at an age when he could fall up or down steps and blood his knees. She had called him her "Lamb." She looked both frightened and shocked.

"Mr. Alex going out—madam!"

Mrs. St. George answered her with a slight and dignified movement of the head.

II

The young green of the year shivered.

Alex St. George had been walking hard for half an hour as though trying to overtake a sense of warmth, but the spring day had no heart in it. The thorn hedges were powdered with young leaves, but, overhead, elms groped blackly at a grey sky. It was a land of elms, towering and melancholy, with the grass looking like a shabby coat, and the young wheat tinged yellow. Young St. George walked as though he had an east wind blowing in his face, but no east wind blew. It was one of those raw, dead days.

And he was afraid. He carried with him a horrible sense of emptiness, in spite of a good lunch at the battalion "mess" at the "King's Head" in Letchford, and a tot of rum in his coffee. He had come out to get warm, and because he felt too restless and miserable to do anything but walk. It seemed to him that he could go on walking interminably along any muddy road in this raw, grey England; for it was England, though the young green of it had for him a kind of anguish.

At the top of a hill where a flint cottage stood between two converging lanes, he turned aside to lean upon a field gate, and to stare at a brown and cloddy piece of ploughland. In the garden of the cottage a very old pear-tree had smothered itself in blossom, and its whiteness was like the glare of snow against the blue-grey gloom of the landscape. Young St. George could see Letchford town streaking the valley with a thin redness, and over it hung a mist of smoke. It looked very still and silent. A robin sang plaintively in the cottage garden.

O, this England, this sodden, grey, beautiful, secure, mist-smudged England! And the spring was coming!

Young St. George's chin came to rest upon his crossed arms. His eyes stared. He had very expressive eyes set rather wide in a broadish, sensitive face. He was a boy who flushed easily. At school they had called him "Alice."

But on this April day his face had a greyness. His eyes stared; his nostrils looked pinched.

For the crisis had been so sudden. It had found him so unprepared, so flabbily and comfortably secure, so sure that he would not have to face the bloody business out yonder. It had shocked him. He had felt as though someone had pulled him out of a warm bed at three o'clock on an icy morning. He was a little, whimpering boy. He wanted to cry out—"Mother—I'm afraid."

For—somehow—he felt that they had not treated him fairly, these doctor men who had allowed him to play in khaki for three years, and then had started to hustle him out into all that horror. Had he but known——! He would have felt more resigned to it, more ready. He had been very ready to go in the beginning, but for three years or more they had allowed him to assume the conviction of a comfortable unfitness.

He looked up at the white pear-tree. It seemed to mock him like a girl wearing a white garland.

III

Mrs. St. George sat waiting at her drawing-room window. Her limitations were so well concealed from the eyes of the average man and woman that almost it might be said that she was without limitations. She cherished a sense of

personal dignity, being a woman who looked into no other mirror but her own, and seeing herself in it as Mrs. St. George of No. 77 Cardigan Square, and Melfont St. Georges in the county of Dorset. Her dignity had known no falterings, possibly because no impediments had placed themselves successfully in the path of it. She drove her emotions—such as they were—like a team of horses under perfect control.

Even when her husband had been carried in from the hunting-field with a broken back, she had sat with a kind of rigid and consenting calmness beside his bed.

"It's rather rough on me, Clara——"

She could remember his wide eyes looking up at her, and suddenly he had turned his face away, and had died strangely and silently without giving her another look or word. That she had failed him in that hour of his bewildering and dreadful darkness seemed to have been beyond her understanding. She did not understand men, the eternal boy in man; she had not understood her husband. Poor, easy, impulsive Charlie St. George! Even at the last she had not understood his look of appeal, or heard the muttered cry of "Mother." It had not been a happy marriage. She had been so cold and so dominant.

She sat and waited for her son. She watched a sandy-coloured cat stalking sparrows in the sooty shrubberies of the square's garden. She had possessed her son, or thought that she had possessed him, as she had never possessed her husband, and so confident had her cry of "Mine" become, that in this crisis, when tumultuous circumstances were sweeping her son away from her control, she sat as she had sat beside her dying husband's bed. She disliked emotion; she was afraid of it; she suppressed it. Anger she would allow herself upon occasions, the anger of a cold and self-cherishing egoist. She realized her crisis, and yet did not realize it in its completeness. Neither did she realize that if one particular emotion is allowed righteous expression, while other emotions are suppressed, that one emotion may become infinitely dangerous. Always, she felt so right when she was angry. Her anger could be a cold blast from which more warmly blooded people shrank and retreated. It had been a very successful emotion, and perhaps that is why it had always seemed so right.

She was angry now. She was angry with the war, and with the Germans, and with the doctors, and also most strangely angry with her son. She had a feeling that somehow he should have contrived to continue physically unfit. She detested interference—interference of any kind. She resented any affair being taken out of her very capable hands. When she sat on a committee—and she sat on many—she sat on them in other respects. She was both a St. George and a Smythe.

She was angry with poor Cummins, for Cummins had come into the room with a suggestion of undisciplined emotion.

"Mr. Alex's room, madam; shall I light a fire?"

"Of course—light a fire."

"But cook says, madam——"

"The cook——!"

"There is less than a hundredweight of coal——"

"Very well, it is April, and Mr. Alex is a soldier."

She sat and watched that sandy-coloured cat intent upon its feline adventures. It suggested a sequence of thoughts, compensating reflections. Yes, Alex was still very much hers. He had not been stalked and captured by some young feline creature. He had not lapsed into one of those disastrous war marriages. If he was going out to France he was going out wholly hers. She did not want Alex to marry. She could presume that without her consent he would not be able to marry. He had no profession. The property was hers for life. She allowed her son five hundred a year and, of course—some day—— But all that was a very long way off, and she need not consider it. She did not consider it.

IV

Mr. St. George's taxi turned into Cardigan Square. A brown kit-bag and a green canvas valise were piled beside the driver, and Mr. St. George sat with his little white cane between his knees, and his eyes looking out at the trees and the houses.

He could see No. 77, its green area railings, white steps, mahogany door, brass knocker, white window-sashes, old gold curtains. It looked just as it had looked when as a youngster of seven he had played in the square garden,

and trundled a hoop across a roadway innocent of taxis, and had fallen up the white steps and blooded one of his knees. And old Cummins—dear old Cummins—had picked up her "Lamb," and carried him up to the bathroom.

Yes—the house was just the same, and yet how different, because the world was different, and he was going out to France, and he was afraid. He could not get warm. And it seemed to him that No. 77 had a new, flat, chilly surface, an air of austerity. It looked all buttoned up to the chin in its smoky brickwork.

He got out of the taxi. Someone had been waiting, for the door opened immediately and he saw the glimmer of Cummins's round spectacles, and the two patches of bright colour over her high cheek-bones. The taxi-man was handling the kit-bag and valise, and doing it cheerfully, a thing that he would not have done for a civilian.

"Hallo—Cummins——"

Cummins's face had a tremulous look.

"O—Mr. Alex——"

He was still her "Lamb." She wanted to put her arms round him and call him "my dear." He had been such a lovable child. And he was going out to the front, and she felt quite sure that he was not fit to go.

"Mater in——?"

"Upstairs, sir——"

The passage-hall gave him an impression of darkness. He laid his cap and stick on the oak table, and heard the tall clock with the brass face ticking as it had always ticked. He saw the stairs, and the red pile carpet and the brass rods, and the faded "prints" hanging on the cream walls. The taxi-man was breathing hard over the luggage.

"Carry it up, sir?"

"Will you——? I'd be obliged to you——"

The man shouldered the valise, and Cummins came to take Mr. Alex's British warm. She felt towards him just as she had felt when she had helped him off with his little overcoat when he had come back from school. She wanted to burst into tears.

"Better show the chap up, Cummins."

"Yes, Mr. Alex——"

"And pay him, will you? Here's some money. Give him a two-bob tip. I'll go on up."

He ascended the stairs, and they felt soft under his feet, and yet everything about the house had a strangeness. It was so quiet, so muffled—and somehow it felt so cold. On the landing the same oak chest with its heraldic panels stood under the landing window, with the same blue-and-white faience bowl upon it. The old gold curtains framed a view of the square.

He opened the drawing-room door. His mother was seated at her desk, with letters and papers spread under her hands. She rose. She stood beside her chair, a restrained and dignified figure, acknowledging no impulse, and no hurried breathing, her white face apparently serene. There was no lighting up of her eyes.

She said:

. . . "Well—you are a little late——"

For a moment they stood looking at each other, and in that moment something seemed to die away out of the son's eyes. It was as though a shadow had passed over his face. He gave a faint smile. He seemed to move forward with a slightly self-conscious awkwardness. He went and kissed his mother on the cheek.

"Yes—just a bit. Trains—not what they were."

"Quite——"

"I've got six days——"

"Yes—so you said. I've waited for tea. Will you ring—my dear?"

He seemed to give her a momentary, flinching glance, and then went and rang the bell. His eyes had a sudden, inward look. It was as though he had been running towards some expected pleasure and had been flung back by a closing door. He had a feeling of bafflement, emptiness. That miserable and dolorous chilliness that he carried about inside him seemed to spread till he felt it in his spine and in his feet. He glanced at the brass tea-tray, sat down, and picked up the poker, and prodded the fire.

"Not quite so cold as it has been——"

Mrs. St. George had resumed her seat at her desk, and was addressing an envelope.

"No—distinctly warmer. But cool—— I'm afraid, my dear, we can't manage a fire in your room——"

"O—that's all right, mater."

"These restrictions are rather boring——"

"Very."

He stole a look at her. He saw her pen give that final, decisive streak below the address upon the envelope. He wondered. He had a kind of frozen feeling. Why didn't ——? But then he remembered that his mother had never stooped to impulse, that he had never run and clung about her knees, that always her pale head had been carried high in the air, unbendingly. But—did she not know—or understand——? How a chap felt——? How—he—felt? But—then—of course—gentlemen—English public-school boys——

He stared at the fire. He stretched out his hands to it, while Mrs. St. George blotted the envelope and affixed a stamp with perfect precision in the right upper corner.

No—she would not allow emotion to intrude upon such an occasion. It was un-English, or un-English according to her code. Emotion was a nuisance, unseemly, like a kettle boiling over or a common child screaming. It did not help things. It upset your dignity. And after all, dignity was essential, calmness in the face of undisciplined circumstance. Dignity was of use. It carried you through awkward moments. She was not going to harrow her son or herself, make things worse by sentimentalizing over them. It made things seem worse than they were. She would send her son to France just as she had sent him off to school. For somehow it seemed to her that she would feel more sure of getting him back if she let him go as though the war was a gentlemanly and sedate business, not to be taken with tears and a gulp.

V

Mrs. St. George dined at eight.

Everything was the same as it had always been. Cummins, when she was not handling dishes or clearing away plates, stood by the Hepplewhite sideboard. The same portraits of the same St. Georges looked down from the walls upon mother and son. "Waterloo St. George," in his guardsman's coat, smiled that half-ironical smile. There was the same silver on the table, the forks with the St. George monogram, the Regency salt-cellars, mustard-pots and pepperets, the same white service with the blue

border. Red and white tulips filled the wedgwood vase in the centre of the table. The old gold curtains, drawn over the closed shutters, seemed to emit a soft glow.

Embarrassment made a third at the table. To Cummins, Mr. Alex looked all eyes; he seemed to have no appetite; she noticed that he glanced often at his mother as though interrogating that coldly handsome and impassive face.

VI

About a quarter past nine Cummins heard the front door slam. She paused in the act of drying a glass tumbler, and supposed that Mr. Alex had gone out, and she allowed herself to wonder where he had gone and why. She was worried about her "Lamb." She could not forget that face of his at the dinner-table, with its wide and restless eyes, and its air of flinching from something.

To Cummins her mistress was just Mrs. St. George, Mr. Alex's mother, a figure that had grown so familiar that Cummins had ceased to wonder at it, but on this April night Cummins did wonder. It seemed to her that her mistress was a very unusual woman, so astoundingly cold and self-possessed, so unlike the kind of mother you expected to see upon the films or the stage. At dinner she behaved as though there was no war, and Mr. Alex had just come down from Oxford——

"She's a queer one," was Cummins' comment. "You'd think she was made of marble."

Cummins finished her washing up and her putting away, and left her pantry to sit by the fire and talk to the cook. There were no other servants in the house in the April of 1918, for the under-maid was on munitions, and the man-servant had joined up in 1915. Cummins and the cook exchanged confidences, while upstairs Mrs. St. George sat at her desk, and glanced through the notes she had made at certain of her committee meetings. She believed in being occupied, even when her son had left her with unaccountable suddenness, and had gone out mumbling that he was going to try and buy some cigarettes.

"May find a shop open."

"Most unlikely. Air-raids, remember——"

But he had gone out, and she had heard the slamming of that door.

Ten o'clock struck, and Mr. Alex had not returned, and the cook, yawning behind a fat red hand, declared that she was going to bed, but Cummins did not feel like bed. She was going to wait up for Mr. Alex; she knew that he had no latchkey; she ascended to the hall, and after turning off the lights, sat down on the oak chair by the window. She pulled aside a fold of the heavy curtains, and raising the blind for couple of inches, peered out into the square. It looked black as a piece of sable velvet, but above the tops of the houses opposite, the sky was pricked thick with stars.

"No moon—thank the Lord," said Cummins, feelingly.

But where was Mr. Alex? The tall clock went on ticking, and the square was as silent as a graveyard, its windows curtained up, its pavements deserted, and Cummins began to have an unpleasant, creepy feeling. She dropped the blind, and rearranged the curtains, and rose and turned on one of the lights. The hands of the clock stood at half past ten.

Cummins sat there and heard eleven strike. Mrs. St. George's hour for retiring was eleven, but the drawing-room door above remained shut.

And then, just when the large hand of the clock was on the quarter Cummins heard footsteps. They came along the side walk; they were rather hurried and irregular footsteps. There was a pause; someone stumbled against one of the steps; she could hear a hand groping and feeling at the door.

She went and opened it. She had to catch him by the arm. He swayed; he leaned against her; his cap was awry.

"Legs—l'legs—all—funny—somehow. C-ummins. I —so—sorry——"

She closed the doorway gently.

"O—Mr. Alex—my dear——"

"M-mater—gone to bed?"

"No."

Drunk though he was, he looked scared.

"Shouldn't have let go—like this—— She—she wouldn't——"

"Ssh—my dear; you ought to be in bed."

She got him across the hall and up the first flight of stairs. "Ssh—my dear——!" But there was no need for her to suggest silence, for Alex St. George, drunk though he was, had no desire to meet his mother. His getting drunk had been a sort of human protest. It had made him feel warm.

"Softly—old Cummins——"

But Cummins's surreptitious shepherding of her "Lamb" to his bedroom where a key could be turned in a lock, and excuses offered from behind a closed door, was not to be permitted. The drawing-room door opened when Cummins and Mr. Alex were preparing to ascend the second flight of stairs, and Mrs. St. George came out upon the landing.

CHAPTER II.

I

At No. 7 Vernor Street, somewnere between Piccadilly and Pall Mall, Mrs. Sarah Greenwood kept a tobacco shop.

No. 7 was a flat-faced London house, stuccoed and painted cream, its window-sashes and sills a dull chocolate, and its private door to the right of the shop of the same colour as the window-frames. The shop was small but double-fronted, with a glass door in the middle. Upon a black fascia board was painted in letters of gold, "S. Greenwood, Cigar Merchant."

Mrs. Greenwood and her two daughters, Corah and Kitty, lived above the shop.

Vernor Street had a faded and mellow distinction of its own, a lingering flavour as of Parma violets and pomaded heads. It suggested the hansom-cab and the silk hat, and had a sedan chair appeared in it on some dim evening the windows of Vernor Street might have expressed no surprise. Mayfair, or the male part of Mayfair, still shopped here at old establishments that had known the "Georges" and in the planting of herself in Vernor Street Mrs. Sarah Greenwood had accepted risks and shown great good sense. She was a doctor's widow. Her husband, who had practised within shouting distance of the Whitechapel Road, and who had been what has been called a "Sixpenny Healer," had died suddenly of pneumonia some seven years before the war, leaving his widow with some £800 in Colonial stock, and two young daughters. Hence, the adventure of No. 7 Vernor Street, and the insinuating of a little, solid, courageous body between a military bootmaker's and a military tailor's. Mrs. Sarah, shrewdly daring, had come and seen and conquered. She had

realized the power of a personality. She had fitted herself into Vernor Street as nicely as a nut into its shell.

For Vernor Street still eschewed cheapness. It had a certain distinguished, shabby rightness; it was in the midst of "club-land"; it gave scope for the persuasions of a personality. It did not glitter; it did not co-operate; it did not pile itself to the skies and fly the flags of half the nations, and advertise itself as a sort of cosmopolitan truck-shop. It was English and individual, and in Vernor Street there was no more individual person than Mrs. Sarah. She had a reputation, and two pretty daughters.

For, in coming to Vernor Street Mrs. Sarah Greenwood had realized that the mere selling of cigars and pipes and cigarettes was but a part of the business; what mattered was how and to whom you sold them. She knew how to strike the right note, or what was still better—to strike no note at all. Hence, the shop window of No. 7 Vernor Street had neither too much in it nor too little—and what was there was of the best. It could be called a gentleman's window, containing a selection of cigar boxes, cedar-wood cabinets, a dozen or so briar pipes of the highest quality, a few boxes of cigarettes. For Mrs. Sarah had arrived at that position when she did not need to rely upon her shop window. She was a person. It would be no exaggeration to say that quite thirty per cent. of the officers who had gone out with the Expeditionary Force in 1914 had known Mrs. Sarah Greenwood.

And with the coming of the Great War Mrs. Sarah had become a still more notable and successful woman. She had sold cigars and given of her wisdom and her humour to the old army, and in the nature of things her name had become known to the new. She was a great little woman, a piece of old England. Officers home on leave came to meet and to sit in the red divan behind the shop, brass hats, red hats, blue hats, plain second lieutenants, guardsmen, riflemen, gunners, cavalry-men. She was a cheerful person to visit. She understood men. She had such vitality. You had only to look at those roguish dark eyes in the round face with its broad blunt nose that had a way of wrinkling itself up, to feel—somehow—that life was a great business.

As some old warrior put it: "She fills you up."

She had such a heart in her. She stood about five feet high, and her hair was as black as a crow's back. Her mouth was big and red and expressive. She had the kindest and the shrewdest of tongues, and a fine sense of humour. She could flatter and she could scold, but there was not a shred of the shrew in her.

"Business is business——"

It was. She was doing big business. How often were the words spoken in overseas messes: "O—you can get them at Sarah's—Vernor Street—you know." The army mail-bags carried her packets into all sorts of odd places, French and Flemish farmhouses, dug-outs, headquarter messes. Women came to No. 7 Vernor Street, wives, sisters, and others. "I want to send some cigars out——" Yes—through all those years Mrs. Sarah and her daughters had been kept very busy.

She was a solid woman, and nowhere else had her solidity expressed itself more fundamentally than in the bringing up of her daughters.

Her text had been "No Nonsense." She had sent them both to goodish schools, and had yet contrived to keep them soundly hers. They had a share in the business, and though comely young women, they shared their mother's sense and solidity. Adoration was not a word much used in the Greenwood vocabulary, but Mrs. Sarah had deserved and been given something that was better than adoration.

II

Kitty Greenwood was opening the shop. She had unlocked the iron grill that was drawn at night across the glass-fronted door, and having pushed it to one side, she stood in the doorway, and looked up and down Vernor Street as though she found Vernor Street as good to look at as an English garden. There had been rain in the night, and the air was fresh. The sun, climbing beyond the spire of St. James's church, drew a band of yellow light along one half the street. Across the way Fream's Hotel was pulling up its blinds. A hotel porter in black trousers and a dark blue waistcoat was watering the two clipped

standard bay-trees that grew in green tubs on either side of the hotel entrance.

An officer, brushing his hair at one of the windows of "Fream's," bent forward to look at Kitty Greenwood. She stood about as high as her mother, five feet or so; she had a bobbed head of honey-coloured hair with some darker shadowings intermixed with it; at a little distance her eyes looked black in the glowing roundness of her face. She was a solid little person, with a beautiful throat, and a chin that had a white firmness. She stood confidently upon her small feet. If she guessed that she was being looked at from the windows of Fream's Hotel, she was not disconcerted or intrigued by the scrutiny. She had grown accustomed to being looked at by all sorts of men, oldish men, young men, bold men, hungry men. And it is possible that she had come to understand that to many of these poor lads she was golden fruit, the more desirable because death might pluck life from their lips any moment. She had been kind to men, but without desiring to give herself to any one of them. She had a exceptional sturdiness. And in the shop she could be something of a little autocrat. There was no nonsense about Kitty.

A voice came to her from within—the voice of the charwoman busy in the divan. It said something about cigarette-ends and matches and the carpet. It was full of cheerful Cockney complaints.

"These young gents——! You'd think——"

Kitty replied to the voice.

"They—don't—think, Mrs. Higgins. They don't want to think——"

There were sounds of brushings.

"All over the cushions, too. You'd think as how——"

"Yes, six of them, Mrs. Higgins—they went back to the front this morning."

"O—lord—Wictoria!—Pore lads——!"

Yes, six young scallywags, hard-bitten youngsters, with strained blue eyes! Her mother had a soft place in her heart for such scallywags; she was kinder to them than Kitty was, for Kitty had a sense of order, and like many little women she stood upon her young dignity. Mrs. Sarah had collected a whole battalion of scallywags, and mothered them, and somehow kept them from going

where they might have gone. Yes, her mother was a dear. She seemed to understand——

Though Kitty did not know that a very stately old fellow, with one of those fine, simple English faces had spoken of Mrs. Sarah as "A moral force." Not that he used those very words. What he did say was that Mrs. Sarah was worth a whole trainful of padres.

"She's—so—human, my dear fellow. She knows——"

So Kitty re-entered the shop, and taking a little feather dusting-brush from a shelf under the counter, began to set it whisking about among the cigar boxes and over the glass cases full of pipes and cigarette-holders. She loved the shop. She liked its order, its neatness, its polished cases and cabinets, its mahogany and its glass, the shelves full of boxes and drums of cigars, the cigarettes—gold-tipped and cork-tipped, lying in their little boxes, the sleek unsoiled pipes. She was a very clean young creature, supremely healthy within and without. The war had not blurred her outlines.

Presently she went to examine the till. She was less decorative and more practical than her sister Corah, and the till and its contents were Kitty's particular concern. She checked its contents twice a day, withdrew and locked away the superfluous cash, and saw to it each morning that there was a proper supply of change available. She liked her paper money clean and uncrumpled, and kept the pounds and ten-shilling notes neatly clipped in separate packets. Half-crowns, florins, shillings, sixpences had each a compartment, and her copper money lived in a flat brown cigar box. The charwoman had finished tidying the divan, and had closed the door that separated the divan from the shop. The door had a long mirror attached to it, and Kitty, after sliding a pile of florins back into the till, happened to glance in the direction of this mirror.

She saw a figure reflected in it.

It was but one of the thousands of figures that had impressed their images upon that mirror, the reflection of a young officer in khaki, slim in the leg, and rather slightly built about the shoulders. He stood in the doorway, but there was a hesitancy in his attitude. There was something about his eyes——

Kitty closed the till. She had a feeling that she had

only to say "Shoo——!" and that figure in the doorway would disappear like a vagrant shadow, and for a moment she continued to look into the mirror. She had seen thousands of faces, stolid faces, raw faces, shrinking faces, faces that were wilfully gay or helplessly overcast. Sometimes she had met eyes that had given her little qualms.

But—this face—somehow—was different from all the others, though why it was different she could not say. She realized that the eyes were looking at her. They had a kind of wide, appealing dumbness.

She turned.

"Good morning."

He seemed to flinch slightly. His right hand jerked itself upwards in a salute.

"I want some cigarettes—straight-cuts——"

He took three steps into the shop.

"Virginian?"

"Please."

"What—kind?"

"O—anything—I—— Gold Flake will do."

"How many?"

"O—fifty."

III

She looked out several boxes for him to choose from, and his eyes remained fixed upon her with a peculiar and questioning intentness. They followed all her movements, and watched both her face and her hands. She had been stared at before with the same kind of hungriness; she was conscious of it, and yet this young man's hungriness had a quality of its own. He looked pinched and cold. It was as though he had been shivering in a raw wind, and had seen the glow of a fire and had come in to it. His eyes seemed to discover in her a beautiful, human warmness, a glow, a something that was disastrously sweet and poignant and beyond him.

She said:

"What about these? Taylor's Navy Cut?"

He nodded, his glance falling suddenly to her hands.

"Thank you. Yes—they'll do."

And she thought: "Yes, most of them drink too much, poor lads." But her impression of him as a feverish cele-

brant almost instantly corrected itself. He looked very new and clean, and rather fragile; he was wearing no flashes; and she missed in him that slightly coarsened air, a heaviness that characterized the men who had seen active service. Their faces appeared smudged as though a heavy hand had pressed upon their youthfulness, and rubbed out or blurred the more delicate lines. She had a feeling that this boy with the wide and startled eyes was very new to it all.

He brought out a ten-shilling note, and as he handed it to her she noticed that his fingers communicated a fine tremor to the crisp piece of paper.

"Very cold—still."

She handed him the change. She said that she thought it was a beautiful day, and he looked at her as though she were mocking him.

"O—yes—I suppose so."

It was April, and to him she seemed a part of April, with her skin like apple-blossom, and her eyes like sloes, and as beautifully tantalizing as the young green of the year. He stood silently staring at a round rubber mat on the counter, as though not knowing how to go or to stay. His face had what she might have described as a naked look. He seemed to loiter as though warming himself at a fire.

"Home on leave?"

Those startled eyes of his met hers.

"Yes. Going out next week."

"First time?"

"Yes."

His eyes fell again. He unbuttoned the flap of a pocket and slipped the cigarette box into it, and fumbled at the button. She glanced at his badges. Infantry, yes. She must have known the badges of every regiment in the army. And suddenly she found herself on the edge of a most poignant pity for him, nor had any other man moved her to such compassion. She felt that he was quite unfit for the brutal business out yonder. In that little red and white room behind the shop Kitty had heard men blurt things out. You might be able to talk to a shopgirl as you could not talk to your mother.

Things were apt to happen either very slowly or very suddenly during the war, nor was Kitty Greenwood

thistledown. That a strange lad should walk into her mother's shop at half past eight on an April morning and rouse such an impulse of pity in her was both extraordinary and natural. Air-raids had brought the incredible to your very doorstep. She did not question the impulse. There was nothing and everything to keep him standing there, and it was obvious to her that he was loth to go.

She picked up a little glass tray full of cigarettes, and held it out to him.

"Had breakfast?"

"O—yes."

He glanced at her face before taking a cigarette, nor did the glance question her modesty; it seemed to search below the surface for some deeper solace, a gentle warmth that would breathe near him in the night of his dread.

"Thank you. I have got six days."

He began to fumble in a pocket, but she was ready with a match before his ineffectual fingers could produce a box.

"Here you are."

She had very pretty white hands, plump but not too plump, with soft, blunt finger-tips. Men should be wary of pointed fingers. Her head came no higher than his shoulder but her sturdiness made him appear the fragile figure. She offered him the match flame, and as he bent to light the cigarette, she studied his face.

"Thank you."

His eyes met hers. Not often had she been looked at in that way, with a sensitive, dumb, startled shyness. It changed an impulse into what—was—perhaps—the most deliberate act of her life.

"London's a lonely place. Hundreds of boys come in here—just to talk. Talking seems to help——"

She was aware of the surprise in his eyes, and something more than surprise. It was as though she had opened a door to a shivering dog. And she went and opened the door of the divan. She said: "You can smoke that cigarette in there—if you like. My mother will be down in a minute." He walked into the divan, and she followed from behind the counter, leaving the door open. He stood. He took off his cap. She noticed that he remained standing until she sat down on the red-cushioned

sofa. He took one of the chairs, and bending forward, rested his elbows on his knees, but his attitude did not suggest repose. He was very nervous, and his nervousness infected her in a most strange way for she became conscious of this little red and white room as a place full of ghosts, the ghosts of men who had sat on those cushions, and whose red blood had been spilt over yonder. Dead lads, dust, a few tarnished buttons and rotting khaki! Something cried out in her. She glanced sideways and almost fearfully at the boy beside her. He—too—perhaps?

And suddenly he spoke.

"It's very peaceful in here—somehow."

IV

She understood. His startled eyes, and his air of dumb and inarticulate appeal revealed him to her. He wanted to talk to someone, to talk as he had never talked before, to empty himself and his fear. She had a feeling that he had no one to whom he could talk, or who would understand the things he had to say. He was afraid, and dared not say so. He had to pretend, and he was not doing it very well. He was both afraid and ashamed of his fear, but not so ashamed of it as to wish to hide it completely.

"Staying at an hotel?"

He started; he had gone off into a sort of overcast reverie.

"No—at my mater's. Cardigan Square."

"You are out early."

"I woke up early. Felt I wanted to walk. My name is St. George."

"Mine's Greenwood—Kitty. My mother owns this business."

"O," he said, and brooded.

She wondered how long he had been in the army, and how it was that he had not been out before. She thought that he did not look very strong; he had one of those delicate, clear skins that freckle easily; the texture of him had too sensitive a fineness. It seemed to show in his hair and his hands.

And then he surprised her. She had grown accustomed

to the many franknesses of the war, an honesty that could be almost brutal. Either you had no skin at all, or a skin that was thickened and less sensitive.

He was holding his cigarette between the first and second finger, and watching the smoke rising from it in a thin thread.

"Funny, isn't it, that our class holds a cigarette like this, and the common chaps hold it with a thumb and finger? I sometimes wish—— But that's neither here nor there. May I tell you something?"

She nodded. She seemed to be growing more and more serious.

"Anything—you like."

"I went home drunk last night. First time in my life. A rotten thing to do."

Again she was aware of that deep stirring of her compassion.

"O—that might depend——" she said.

"On why—or how?"

"Of course."

"It shocked my mater. She's always so—perfectly right."

"Was she shocked?"

"Awfully. But—I say—I ought not to be talking like this—— I don't know what you must think——"

She looked at him for a moment, knitting up her straight, broad forehead, and then she rose and closed the door.

"If I understand—— That makes it all right, doesn't it?"

He stared up at her with those wide eyes of his.

"You mean—you understand—why?"

She nodded.

"Why not? The war's a beastly business. I know. And if you like—you can tell me——"

His head went down.

"But I simply can't tell you. I can't tell anyone. It's too——"

She sat down nearer to him.

"Yes, you can. You can tell me. In fact—I think I know."

He seemed to flinch as though she had touched some acutely sensitive and hidden wound.

"You know?"

"You are feeling rather bad—about going out there."

He stared at her for a moment.

"Good Lord, do I look as bad as that?"

"O—no."

But he was horrified. He sat with his head between his hands, staring at the carpet.

"But I must do. You must have seen. Everybody must see. When I'm out in the street I see people looking at me and thinking—'That fellow's afraid.' And—my God—it's true. I never knew that I—— And it's horrible, so horribly humiliating——"

She sat very still.

"It's natural. I've seen scores of men—who dreaded going out—— And they were afraid of their own fear. You won't feel so bad about it—perhaps—now that someone knows."

His head remained down.

"But you must—despise me."

"No—not for a moment. Isn't every man afraid? Of course. I have heard a V.C. boy say—here in this very room—that any man who said that he didn't know what fear was, was either a liar or a fool."

"Thank you," he said. "But—I wish——" and lapsed into silence, for having come out of his dark cupboard, the black hole of his unconfessed terror, he seemed to become acutely conscious of her as a woman, a sturdy little person with very dark and fearless eyes, and a glowing head, and a warm white skin. She had spoken of the day as a day of beauty, and suddenly he seemed to have his head in the sunlight. She had become to him a thing of beauty, a live, warm, human creature who somehow understood how a man felt. A girl in a shop! But then——! And he was sitting there within a yard of her, alive to the glow and the mystery of her.

"You have been awfully good to me."

"O, not a bit."

He looked at her shyly, but with slightly more confidence, and with a very definite homage in his eyes.

"Queer that I should have wandered in here? Almost as though it was meant——"

"Perhaps it was meant. I think there is somebody in the shop."

When she opened the door Alex saw a tall officer with a very red face and a white moustache, and three rows of ribbons on his tunic, and crossed swords and two stars on his shoulder-straps. He stood in the middle of the shop; he gave the little figure in the green knitted coat a slight bow! he both smiled and looked at her like the very great gentleman that he was.

"Well—Miss Kitty—— I want a box of my usuals—if you please."

Mrs. St. George's son sat and listened to those two pleasant voices. He threw quick and sensitive glances round the little room. It was strange how some rooms affected you, and this back room, with its red walls and white paint and red cushions, made you feel snug and warm and safe. Extraordinary chance—his drifting in here! He supposed that he ought to be going, but he did not want to go. No, not at all. In fact, his overcast mood threatened to return when he imagined himself out in the street and alone. Yet, he ought to go back to his mother, his much-shocked mother who was always so right.

He saw the general raise his hand to his cap, and disappear through the shop doorway. So a general could salute Miss Kitty Greenwood. Quite right. And Kitty was looking in at him with very intent dark eyes. He had become more than a chance and casual man sitting on her mother's sofa. Something had happened, and it had happened to them both.

"General Gratton. He knew me when I had my hair down."

"Fine old boy. One of the sahibs."

"Most of them are like that."

She came into the room, and he looked up at her like a shy supplicant.

"I suppose I ought to be going. I suppose you'll be busy."

"We are always busy."

"Would you mind—if I stayed a little longer? It's so—so restful in here."

She appeared to be considering something. She turned and looked through the doorway into Vernor Street.

"The sun's shining. We generally have quite a crowd here."

He stood up. He thought that she was gently hinting. He was just as ready to efface himself. But she remained standing in the doorway. She put up her hand and touched her hair.

"One gets a little tired of crowds. Sometimes—I take a day off. You see—my mother and my sister——"

His wide eyes gave a kind of eager flicker.

"You couldn't—could you?—I mean—I have had no one to talk to. And you've been so awfully——"

She looked at him steadily.

"I don't go out——"

"No; of course not. I really didn't mean. Not for a moment. Please believe——"

"Sit down," she said, "I'll tell the others. I'll go and put on a hat."

V

When Kitty opened the door of the upstairs sitting-room she saw her mother sitting, as Mrs Sarah always sat after breakfast, settled well back in an arm-chair between the fireplace and the near window. Her mother had worked hard, and loved her comfort, and being a comfortable woman no one ever grudged it to her. Her daughters would tuck a tuffet under her feet. The Greenwoods' was not a sentimental household, but when a woman understood her daughters as Mrs. Sarah understood them she had a claim to consideration. Youth loves where it likes.

"That you, poppet? Poor young Ryder's dead."

Always before reading the news Mrs. Sarah would glance through the casualty lists, not from morbidity of mind, but because she had a motherly eye upon so many of the men out there, and had had them sitting and laughing upon her red cushions. Poor lads! And hardly a day would pass without her having to utter that refrain—"Poor So-and so's been killed." She would give her head a kind of defiant shake, and look just what she was—a bit of old London and old England, a sturdy fighter, no slobbering pacifist. "Damn the Germans! Carry on."

She was a strong and a solid little woman, with a massive head well set on a fine throat. She had a bosom. Her glossy black hair, without a grey streak in its coiled profusion showed the sheen of a great vitality. Her jocund

eyes, and her broad and humorous nose expressed courage. She enjoyed life, and perhaps that was why she understood other lives, and the souls of men who were losing their lives out yonder.

Kitty closed the door.

"Mother, I'm going out to-day."

Mrs. Sarah laid the paper on her knees. She knew that when Kitty made such an announcement there was a very good reason for it. There was nothing flighty or inconsequential about Kitty. Her younger daughter was a determined little person, very much her mother's daughter, less decorative than Corah with her large, dark and slightly languid comeliness.

"Quite so, poppet. Anyone downstairs?"

"Yes, a boy."

"Officer?"

"Going out for the first time, and feeling rather bad about it. And—in a way—so am I."

"You!"

"Yes; I am."

Mrs. Sarah said nothing for a moment. Her solid stillness was a counterpoise to the sturdy frankness of her daughter. They understood each other. But this was unexpectedly sudden, especially in Kitty.

"Well—you know, my dear."

"I do."

"That's right."

"Can you manage?"

"Corah will be down in ten minutes. I'll go downstairs."

"You'll find him in the divan. His name is St. George. He lives in Cardigan Square. I'll go and put on my hat."

VI

Mrs. Sarah, knowing men as she did, could sum a man up by the way he rose from the sofa, and when Alex St. George got up rather hurriedly, and stood with a slight stoop of shy courtesy, Mrs. Sarah had him catalogued. Having a dignity of her own she liked a lad who had breed and good manners, and if he were shy so much the better. Bull-headed youth is both dull and tiresome. She smiled at Kitty's protégé, and held out a hand.

"I'm Mrs. Greenwood. Kitty has gone to put on a hat."

Astonishing situation! But was any situation astonishing during the war? Alex met Mrs. Sarah's hand to find its grasp firm and reassuring. He was aware of her as a solid person in black who smiled, and who appeared to accept his presence in the red and white room as the most natural of happenings. He had a moment of self-questioning panic. Was he making a fool of himself, going out with a girl who was a complete stranger, a girl whose mother kept a shop? Would not his own mother regard the incident as an alternative to too much whisky?

Mrs. Sarah sat down.

"Smoke—if you like——"

He too sat down, but on the very edge of the sofa. He looked at Mrs. Sarah with his wide, dark eyes.

"It's awfully good of—Miss—Greenwood——"

"Kitty—is—good," said her mother.

"I hope I'm not——"

He found his words arrested by Mrs. Sarah's inevitable smile.

"O, you are what we call a gentleman, Mr. St. George. And although we keep a shop——"

"Yes, of course; I——"

"Everything is a little unusual—these days, my dear. The thing is not to worry too much."

He stared at her. He had a sudden feeling that his panic mood of the moment ago had been both caddish and a little ridiculous. He liked Mrs. Sarah, and liked her at once, and immensely, without being able to say why. Was it her solidity? She looked so alive and real and compact. She gave you a sense of cohesion and continuity; she made you feel that—after all, life was a solid business, full of heart and courage; she looked as indestructable as London; when she smiled you knew that there must be things worth smiling at. Alex was not old enough to explain his impression by saying that both Mrs. Sarah and her daughter were strong animals, little women of superb vitality who could emit from their vigorous entities wholesome and potent suggestions.

Deprecatingly he said: "I think I worry too much."

She accepted the statement.

"The way one's made, Mr. St. George. Plum pudding or jelly. Don't quarrel with yourself——"

He laughed.

"Jelly! That's good. But so long as the jelly keeps its shape—even if it quakes——?"

"Exactly. Here's Kitty. Well, you two young things know how to spend the day—I suppose."

Kitty looked up at the man.

"I dare say we shall find out."

CHAPTER III

I

As Kitty had said, it was a beautiful day, and they sat on a seat in Queen's Walk, and saw the white clouds going over the high houses. The lilac buds were turning from gold to green, and on the grass the sunlight came and went. The windows of the houses would glimmer and grow dark, like eyes, smiling or serious.

And it seemed to Alex St. George that the anguish of the young year was less greenly poignant, and that the air was warmer, and that under this open, April sky the girl beside him was even more pleasant to behold. Her very littleness appealed to him, her glow, her perfect skin. Yet, though physically she was like a ripe and wholesome fruit she was more to him than a mere sensuous image.

For he was out of love with himself, and when a man is out of love with himself his desire to be loved becomes urgent and childlike. He wanted to give and to receive devotion. He knew now that he had been out of love with himself for the last two years, ever since the Somme had begun to swallow men, and he had seen other fellows go out, while he had accepted safety. He had accepted it too easily, just as he had accepted the domination of his mother. Yet, deep down in him, there had been inward conflict, repressed, but simmering below the surface, awaiting its chance to emerge, and when the chance had had come he had found himself a potential coward. It had shocked him. He had allowed himself to be wrapped up in a sense of security. The doctors had found him fit, or fit enough to bear a share in the last ruthless winnowing. And then fear had come, and self-questionings and a dread of his own fear, and a sense of shame. What if he failed out there, and found himself a martial misfit, a shirker, a rotter?

"You wouldn't sit on this seat with me if you knew."

But she was sitting there as though it had become the one place in the world for her.

"How do you know?"

"I—must—tell you."

He felt that he had to tell her, to put himself right with her, to strip off those years of shame, and now begin anew. For he was ashamed of them, though he had been officially secure. He had not been able to tell his mother. He had begun to be aware of harbouring a vague feeling of resentment against his mother.

"Will you listen?"

"I'm here to listen."

He glanced at her serious and attentive face. She was looking up at the houses. He saw the white line of her throat, and her firm little chin.

"You'll despise me."

"No, not if you tell me."

His eyelids flickered. Why—if he told her—would she think differently? Would it make things different—between them? And she already had for him a strange nearness—a something——

"I have been serving for more than three years. I wasn't supposed to be fit. They didn't send me out."

"Well, wasn't that their business?"

"Yes—but I ought not to have let myself get stuck at home. Coddled and protected. And then when they did push me out—I seemed to get panic. And I couldn't tell anybody—not even my mother."

He watched her face. What a glowing face she had! It was so firm and yet so soft. And that honey-coloured hair of hers seemed to emit a kind of light from under the brim of her little black hat.

Turning her head, and looking him straight in the eyes, she asked:

"Why couldn't you tell your mother?"

"Why——?O—well, there are some people you don't tell things to. But I oughtn't to discuss my mater——"

"Quite right. But now that you are going out——"

She paused on the last word, as though prompting him.

"Isn't it—final? When one realizes that a thing has got to be——"

He nodded.

"I think I want someone to believe in me."

She made a little movement as of drawing near to him. She understood that he wanted to feel someone near him, or she guessed it. They had known each other less than three hours, and yet the surprising knowledge had come to her that she could care as Kitty—Mrs. Sarah's daughter—might be expected to care. It would be a very determined caring.

"Supposing someone did believe——?"

"If someone could——!"

"Or if you could believe that someone could."

"You couldn't."

"You haven't asked me."

Impulsively he touched her arm.

"If you could—— I wouldn't mind. You must think me a such weak beast——"

"I don't. You've had the pluck to tell me this. I suppose it cost you something."

And suddenly she stood up.

"Let's walk. Walking's good."

They wandered across the Green Park. Ten inches shorter than young St. George she walked along the middle of the path, looking straight before her as though some objective had come into view and she meant to reach it. The sunlight played upon the fronts of the Piccadilly houses. She knew her Green Park and her St. James's, and her Hyde Park as a London child knows them, but to-day they seemed both smaller and more spacious. The noise of the traffic was confusedly impersonal. As for Mr. Alex St. George she was aware of him as a shy, freckled, rather loose-limbed boy loping along beside her like a dog that had suddenly attached itself. She was not at all conscious of him as a young man whose mother had a house in Cardigan Square, or any difference there might be in their social positions or their worldly wealth. He was the eternal boy in trouble, her counterpart, her contrast, wilting where she was sturdy, yet not without a sensitive courage of his own.

She was thinking of his mother, and his refusal to discuss his mother, his mother who was always so right. So Mrs. St. George was that sort of woman! Already Kitty's square little chin was setting itself towards an inward confronting of Mrs. St. George.

Arriving at Hyde Park Corner, they stood by the railings while a line of traffic passed.

"Let's go and look at the Serpentine."

"Yes—let's. I used to sail boats there."

"And you wore a sailor suit?"

"I did. Now, we can get across."

He put out a shepherding arm that curved close to her but did not touch her, and on the other side she gave him a serious and upward smile.

"You are more all right than you think you are."

"No—I'm not. Unless——"

"Unless what?"

He prevaricated.

"Let's get across to the other side of the Row."

"Unless what?" she repeated.

He looked beyond the trees into the hazy London distance.

"Supposing I can't believe in myself—unless——?"

"Someone else believes?"

"That's it. A pretty shameful confession."

"But aren't we all more or less like that? Some more, some less. How do you like the hat I'm wearing?"

He glanced at her hat.

"It seems just—the—hat."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"Well—that makes me feel good friends with my hat. You see?"

He smiled down at her.

"I say—you are rather extraordinary. You seem to get right at things."

"I'm older than you are."

"I wonder?"

"Twenty-four."

"So am I."

"Well, we'll leave it at that. I have been working for six years."

"Must you?"

"Must I! I like it. Up at half past six and cooking the breakfast. Ours is a cheerful place. How did you like my mother?"

"Immensely."

"Everybody does. She's a dear. Had a pretty tough fight for it—you know, keeping and educating two girls after my father died."

"What was your father?"

"A doctor in the East End. He didn't leave much money. But we do pretty well these days."

"I'm glad."

He was looking at her more and more attentively, and with a growing and inward delight that grew out of the misery of the last few days like a young plant out of the soil. Wasn't she unique; wasn't the whole adventure unique? But he did not think of it as an adventure. He had a natural seriousness. He was one of those young souls who must look up to something or to somebody, a lovable lad, quite without side, and still very young. In civil life he would be full of enthusiasms for a book, or a play, or a landscape, and at this moment in his life his enthusiasm had discovered Kitty. She was worth it, but how much worth it she was he did not yet know. Nor was he merely a nice lad who fell into love and out of it with dreadful facility. Chance had brought her to him at a moment when he had felt so out of love with himself that his own service revolver had suggested a weak way out. In a way she drew him as a capable and warm-hearted young nursemaid draws a troubled and too-sensitive child.

They were standing by the Serpentine, watching the wind and the sunlight upon the water, when he asked her a question.

"I say—may I call you Kitty?"

"I think so."

"Thanks awfully. And would you let me take you out to lunch?"

"But doesn't your mother expect you back to lunch?"

Instantly a clouded look came into his eyes.

"I don't want to go back there yet. I want to feel alive."

II

Mrs. St. George had neither the magnanimity nor the wisdom of a certain good friend of hers who—when an only son got himself engaged to a hospital nurse—rang up the girl, "my deared" her, and asked her to lunch.

She had viewed the war from a distance, and yet she had done her duty by the war, short of encouraging her son to rush over yonder into the bloody reality of it. In a sense she had made the war her own, and allowed it to give expression to a number of her prejudices. She had a capable, cold head, a passion for putting people and things in order, and for keeping them in order; she looked well on a platform and could speak with chilly reasonableness.

But the spirit of her activities was repressive, the prevention of this, and the prevention of that. There were all sorts of things that she would have liked to repress, anything that had the smell of sex, of impulse, of animal naturalness. Had she had her way she would have prohibited everything that tended to raise life's temperature, the whisky distilleries and the breweries, the night-clubs, the music-halls, the picture-theatres. She would have made Piccadilly Circus as chaste and chilly as the North Pole.

On that day in April she returned to No. 77 Cardigan Square about half-past twelve. She walked, very properly having laid up her car and sent her chauffeur to join the Mechanical Transport section of the A.S.C. She had been presiding on some committee or other that dealt efficiently with the herd's inefficiencies.

That was Mrs. St. George's misfortune. It was not what she did, but the way she did it, and why she did it, that put her social pies and puddings into cold storage. No doubt this fool world would be the better for being ruled by a dictatorship of the biological mind, by a wisdom that is both kind and ruthless and impartial. Mrs. St. George was not impartial. She objected to certain other women giving birth to babies—but also she had tried to keep her son at home.

She trod slowly up the three very white steps, and

slipped her latchkey into the big room door. Cummins met her in the hall, a mutely hostile Cummins.

"Is Mr Alex in?"

"No, madam."

Mrs. St. George had not seen her son that morning. He had breakfasted early and had disappeared. No doubt he had felt thoroughly ashamed of himself after the lapse of yesterday, and to Mrs. St. George it seemed quite proper that Alex should be feeling a little shy of her.

"Lunch at one, Cummins."

"Yes, madam."

"I expect Mr. Alex back to lunch. The Canteen Committee meets here at three."

"Very good, madam."

"We shall use the dining-room. Have the chairs arranged round the table."

She went upstairs and sat down at her desk. This desk was a war product. She was a woman of affairs, and she kept this desk and her affairs in perfect order. One recess was full of neat little notebooks nicely labelled "Canteen"—"Prisoners of War"—"Care of Men on Leave"—"Married Women"—"Allowances"—"Vigilance." She had some notes to make, and withdrawing one of the little books, she opened it and made her entries, and returning it to its place in the recess, she sat and looked out of the window. Yes, no doubt Alex was feeling seriously ashamed. No doubt he would come back and apologize, sit up like a good dog, and wave his paws in the air. It was abominable that he should have to go out there to France. He really was not fit for it. If his own mother did not know that, who could know it? But, then, after all, she could congratulate herself on the fact that Alex had not got mixed up with women or made one of those disastrous war marriages. Marriage? O, yes, some day, but she hoped to be able to select the girl for him. But—why marriage? Why should Alex marry? He was dependent on her. He had left Oxford to join the army. He had no profession; he was not trained to earn an income. She allowed him five hundred a year. She could allow him a thousand. But if he married——? Or wanted to marry? And suddenly she drifted off into what was for her strange and dubious speculation. She wanted to keep Alex under her hand, much as she kept

this desk of hers. She could not see anything in marriage that could make him half so comfortable as he could be in No. 77 Cardigan Square. She knew quite well that she would try to keep him from getting married, just as she had tried to keep him in England. He had always been a tractable and obedient child.

Cummins broke her reverie.

"It is one o'clock, madam. Will you wait for Mr. Alex?"

"I will wait a quarter of an hour, Cummins."

But Mrs. St. George lunched alone. Obviously, Alex's contrition was serious and proper. She did not visualize him sitting at a little table in a Soho restaurant, opposite a compact little person with a glowing face and hair, and serious wise eyes. How could she? How could so much happen in one morning? Kitty, the daughter of Mrs. Sarah who sold tobacco, cigarettes and cigars, was below Mrs. St. George's horizon.

Alex's mother presided at her committee meeting, dismissed it, and sat down alone to a rationed tea. She was becoming slightly annoyed with the persistence of her son's penitence, and when, about half past five, she heard the front door close, she was in something of the mood of the woman who smacks her safely restored lost child just to give relief to her feelings. Alex should have returned to lunch. She had nicely timed the period that should be allowed him for contrition.

She listened. She expected him to come up at once to the drawing-room, but he did not come. She got up and rang the bell.

"Is that Mr Alex, Cummins?"

"Yes, madam."

"Where is he?"

"In the dining-room, madam."

She did not tell Cummins to inform Mr. Alex that his mother was upstairs and expecting him. She sat down by the window and waited, and Cummins went below. She peeped into the dining-room and saw her "Lamb" standing at one of the windows overlooking the square. He did not hear her, and Cummins softly withdrew. It was possible that Mr. Alex did not wish to hear anybody. When she had opened the door to him he had walked in with a "Hallo, Cummins," and an air of

supreme detachment. The pupils of his eyes had shown two little blurs of light. And Cummins had seen and wondered. She had said nothing, nor flicked the queer exultation from that dreaming face with a "Your mother is upstairs, sir. She expected you to lunch." No, Cummins had withdrawn herself into further wonderings. Mr Alex had come back with a strange, new face. Another sort of intoxication but not the intoxication of yesterday!

Some twenty minutes passed before young St. George went upstairs. He hesitated outside the drawing-room door, and then suddenly turned the handle.

"Hallo, mater."

They looked at each other. His mother received the impression that there was something different about him. He did not appear contrite; far from it; he looked rather happy.

"I expected you to lunch, Alex."

"Sorry, mater. I met a friend, and we had lunch out."

She waited. She expected him to say something apologetic about yesterday, but he did not look apologetic. He stood there staring out of the window; his eyes were very bright; a smile seemed to flicker about his lips.

She was annoyed. One of her favourite ways of opening a discussion was by saying—"I'm not an exacting woman." She said—"I don't think it was considerate of you—to leave me alone like this—especially after what happened yesterday."

He gave her a queer, quick look. He had been about to tell her something, but now she would not be told. He went nearer to the window. His face had grown suddenly and strangely stubborn.

"I'm sorry, mater, but you didn't understand."

And then he walked out of the room, and left her feeling icily offended. Not understand? She!

III

Kitty returned to No. 7 Vernor Street about half past five. She found Corah in charge of the shop.

"Mother in?"

"Yes—upstairs."

Mrs. Sarah was having tea. She had waited half an hour for Kitty, but when no Kitty had appeared she had sat down to read a novel, and eat nut-cake or some abomination that the food-shortage had imposed upon the people at home. She was not worrying about Kitty. Her daughters were two responsible and level-headed young women, each of whom owned a latchkey, for Mrs. Sarah contended that if a girl was not to be trusted with a latchkey—well—as a mother you had somehow failed. Mrs. Sarah did not dwell with the suppressionists. She had smacked her daughters well and wisely in their early days, and that had sufficed.

Kitty came into the room as though nothing had happened, and took off her hat, and saw her mother still crumbling cake of a dismal and branny dryness.

"O, you poor dear!"

For Mrs. Sarah did enjoy sweet things, cream buns, and chocolate cakes, and macaroons.

"Had a good time, poppet?"

"Very."

Kitty sat down, and Mrs. Sarah went on crumbling cake. The old adage held. Ask no leading questions and you will be told no lies, but Mrs. Sarah had improved upon that somewhat cynical saying. Smile and don't fuss and the truth will come and sit in your lap. Kitty looked just a little flushed, and her eyes had a peculiar, bright seriousness.

"Had tea, poppet?"

"Yes, we had tea at Rumpelmayer's."

Her mother noticed the "we." Kitty had not been addicted to plurals. Always she had shown a preference for the independent and satisfying "I."

"A nice boy—that. Nice manners."

Kitty got up and stood by the window. She could see Fream's Hotel, and the stone spire and the old blackened red walls and grey ashlar quoins of St. James's church. The sun was striking the gold vane and the stone ball at the top of the spire. Half a dozen plane-trees showed a powdering of green. How things seemed to change! Or—rather—it was you or your mood that changed.

Meanwhile Mrs. Sarah had finished her dry cake, and had laid aside her book. She knew that some things happen very suddenly.

"Mother," said Kitty, "I don't know yet—but I think——"

"Serious, poppet?"

"Just as serious as it could be."

"You sudden thing—come and kiss me."

CHAPTER IV

I

No war marriage was more singular than Kitty Greenwood's, for no marriage was ever more sudden and yet more deliberate. She went to it with widely open eyes, and consent in each beat of her vigorous little heart. Alex St. George needed her. And in loving him she knew that there was a need to be assuaged, a fear to be fought, a courage to be made whole.

They were married before a Registrar early on the morning of Alex St. George's last day in England, and it was wholly their own affair, without applause or interference. Mrs. St. George knew and suspected nothing.

That was life's reply to the suppressionist. Her son came and went during those days of his leave; they sat down together in the presence of the portraits of the dead St. Georges; they appeared the conventional mother and son. For two days Mrs. St. George had stood upon her dignity, and yet when her son came home to her one night, and with a mute gentleness kissed her, she misunderstood his gentleness.

"Sorry, mater, about the other night."

She mistook gentleness for docility. Alex was out and about a good deal, meeting hypothetical friends, but in spite of his absences she conceived him to be very much hers, the beloved son possessed and dominated. To her he was what she wished him to be, and not what he was. She had no knowledge of what was passing in his mind, no glimmerings of insight, nor did she guess that he had grown older, and could look at her almost dispassionately, yet with a young kindness. Poor old mater! He had no wish to tell her about Kitty, at least not yet, for life was his for the moment, to be shared with no one but Kitty, and instinctively he knew that his

mother would misunderstand it all, and that were he to tell her, the romance of those few days would be torn to tatters. Nor was it fear that kept him from telling her. His insight had been quickened; he was exercising a sensitive young restraint; he looked at both these women, his mother and his wife, and seemed to realize that during those last few days they had to be kept apart.

On the night before the day of their marriage these two young people did debate the problem of Mrs. St. George. Kitty walked backed with him to Cardigan Square, and they wandered round it in darkness. No. 77 was as dark as the square, a house muffled up against all mischances, and in passing it Kitty had qualms.

"Is it quite fair to her?"

But almost with passion he pleaded for silence.

"It's our show. You don't know my mother—Kitty. She'd spoil it. And to me—it's rather sacred. —I know it sounds ungenerous. In a way it's not fair to either of you."

"In a way it isn't."

"But you'll trust me. I shall write and tell her directly I get across. It's not because I'm afraid to tell her now."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure. I'm so proud of you——"

She held his arm.

"Well—I feel that the last hours are mine. I'm not going to give them up. I'm not marrying your mother."

She did not dwell upon the obvious assumption that she would be left behind to face the resentment of a woman who was always so right. For there would be resentment. "My son has been entangled." Undoubtedly that might be the cry, but Kitty did not wish that cry to resound on her marriage morning. She shut her lips and squared her chin. She was a rather fearless little person.

"The moment's mine—ours."

He was so sure that he could make it right, but that was for the future to decide, and Kitty grasped the present and left to-morrow to look to itself. She was both practical and very warm hearted. She was both mother and mistress; she had come to him as an immense inspiration, and she knew it; she suggested, she strengtb-

ened, she consoled. She would be life and love at his elbow out there in France. And he mattered to her very dearly; she made him realize it, and in making him realize it she helped him to be a man.

II

It was Mrs. Sarah who—in the face of these sudden happenings—displayed the most unexpected of attitudes. One mother did not know, and the other refused to know more than the essentials, and she had her reasons. As a responsible woman Mrs. Sarah might have mounted her responsibility, and demanded a proper publicity, but she did nothing of the kind. Having formed her own opinion of young St. George, and knowing her daughter as she did, she refused either to meddle or to advise. There are occasions when youth is best left without interference.

On the morning of the particular day Mrs. Sarah kissed her daughter, and pushed four five-pound notes into Kitty's vanity-bag. Lads are apt to be short of funds.

"You may find that useful. Mind you—my dear—I don't know anything about the other side of the picture."

Kitty was trying on a hat.

"You mean—his mother and No. 77?"

"Exactly. I have as much right to assume that I'm almost as ignorant as she is. It's your affair, and his, poppet."

Kitty turned and looked at her mother. Mrs. Sarah was smiling, but how much there was behind that smile Kitty could guess.

"You are a dear. You have loved me all these years, and then when I go off like this——"

"I go on loving you, poppet. I did what you are doing. Besides, I'm not losing you all at once."

"You'll never lose me. You couldn't. You've never tried to clutch at us."

They held each other close for half a minute. Mrs. Sarah's face was all creases, and Kitty's eyes were wet.

"There—there," said her mother. "You'll know how to spend the day. It's his last day, poor lad."

"We are going out into the country."

Though Kitty did not fully appreciate the scope of her

mother's shrewdness, for Mrs. Sarah had looked into Debrett, and cast a considering glance at Cardigan Square. O, yes, there would be storms. The mildest of women might be expected to resent an alliance between Vernor Street and Cardigan Square, and young St. George's mother—judging by his reservations—was not a mild woman. O, very well! If one mother flew to arms, the other mother could be ready for her, and able to assert that she—Mrs. Greenwood—had had no more to do with the romance than had Mrs. St. George. Even less so. Moreover, Mrs. Sarah was not going to apologize for Kitty. By no means. The man who was marrying Kitty was a damned lucky fellow. Other mothers could sit up and take notice. If any favours were being conferred, that wholesome and sturdy and lovable young person—her daughter—was conferring them.

Which—as a matter of fact—was true, though none of the potential disputants were likely to realize how true it was, until other things had happened.

The day was kind, one of those illusive and sunny days inserted into the wet, raw greyness of an English April. Married just an hour, they took a train to Dorking, and walked out to Wootton Hatch. They lunched there, Kitty in a jade-green jumper and a black skirt, her head the colour of an autumn lime leaf. Their feet touched under the table, and their eyes touched glances above it. Her solid little face glowing devoutly contrasted with his freckled and more mobile lightness; he smiled much more than she did; her very dark eyes, glimmering now and again, were—in the main—immensely serious.

"Mrs. St. George!"

He glanced at her ring. Very solemnly in the train and in an empty first-class carriage she had kissed that ring.

"That's what it means to me—you. I have had dozens of men silly about me. That's why this is so serious."

"Dozens!"

"O, don't be afraid. I am as new as this ring. I have never cared for anybody before."

"Not a soul?"

"No, not like this."

Afterwards they wandered up to Leith Hill where the gorse was aflame among the pines, and sat on a grass slope below the brick tower, and looked out over all that

peaceful country. Its soft greens melted into a still softer blue; the downs were very dim in the distance; the Sussex woods black and brown in the pale sunlight. Birds sang.

"You wouldn't think," said he.

She sat close to him. There were a few other people there, but who cared? Why should one care? His left arm encircled her, her hand grasping the strap of his Sam Browne belt. His right arm lay across her shoulders, and his fingers touched her hair.

"You have been good to me."

"Because I wanted to, dear lad. When you come back——"

She was aware of a sudden stillness, a tenseness.

"When you come back——"

She repeated the words with deliberation and conviction, gazing steady-eyed at England spread below her.

"It can't last for ever. Suppose you will go on working?"

"Of course."

"The mater allows me five hundred a year. Then—there is my pay. There's no need, you know—unless ——"

"I like it. Besides—I'm going to help mother—till you come back. Besides, haven't you thought——?"

"Of course I've thought. You have made me think. You're so splendidly independent."

"Am I?"

"You have taught me—tons—in a week. If I come back——"

"When—you come back."

"I shall have to get a job of some kind. A man ought to have a job."

"He must."

"We couldn't live on——"

Her strong little arm contracted.

"Not for a moment. I wouldn't. I don't mind having to put up with things, our own things. We have got to run our own show, Alex."

"You dear," he said, and kissed her.

The nature of his job, his ability to fill a niche in the social scheme of things—lay with the future. It would have to be faced, and so would the woman who had a passion for bossing people. Kitty had not married Alex

St. George for his mother's money, and she had no intention of being bossed by his mother. No, not for a moment. But Kitty had a happy and determined way of putting any future problem away in a cupboard and turning the key on it until that particular problem had to be taken out and put in the oven. She could concentrate on the present. She did not go round to-morrow's corner to look for trouble. When she met it she would square her chin at it.

"I can send you home ten pounds a week—you know."

"You need not send me a farthing unless you want to."

"Of course I shall want to."

"Then—I'll bank it. It may come in useful later on. I have a banking account of my own."

"Have you?"

"Corah and I have a share in the business. I bank with the Midland in Haymarket."

He seemed to think it wonderful that she should have a banking account of her own. In fact, everything about his young wife was wonderful to Alex St. George. She had such sense, such a head on her shoulders, and such a comely head and such plump and pretty shoulders. And she understood him. By God—how she understood him! How was it?

He asked her, and she twisted her fingers into his belt.

"O—I don't know! Directly I saw you—— It's caring, I suppose. And I'm not exactly a fool."

III

On the way back to Dorking it was agreed between them that Alex owed part of his last evening to his mother.

"She will be wondering—Kitty."

"What did you tell her?"

"Nothing. I just said that I should be out most of the day."

Half-way down the steep hill from Wootton Hatch, and under the bare boughs of the beeches, he caught his wife suddenly and held her close.

"Kitty—I wish——"

She showed more gentleness than passion. Passion

exhausts. The finer tenderness burns with a steady flame.

"This war can't last much longer. I'll write to you every day."

He kissed her, and stood at gaze.

"I'm thinking of to-morrow. You will be at Victoria?"

"Of course."

"And if my mother comes——? Shall I tell her? You two left alone on the platform. What do you think?"

"If she comes—tell her."

"I will," he said.

But for him the unshadowed delight of the day had passed. The dusk seemed to rise about him. She felt his increasing silence, a tenderness that was poignant and inarticulate, and in an empty carriage of the homeward train they sat very close, holding hands. His eyes had that troubled and widely open look as he stared out of the window at the moving landscape, while she—more and more conscious of his young sadness—became more and more maternal and protective. She sat with one little fist clenched. That creamy face of hers with its glow of colour seemed to express an indomitable obstinacy. It was Kitty against the world-war, against death, against fear, against everything. Her sturdy vitality seemed to sit up and confront fate and all fate's possible mischances. She had the look of a very determined child, clutching a beloved toy and refusing to relinquish it. She squared her chin at the unknown.

She became wilfully cheerful.

"I have three hundred pounds saved. I don't see why I shouldn't be thinking about furniture."

Pathetic reality! They clung to it, both of them. They began to plan, as though the constructing of that plan gave them a little sense of security. It was a sand-castle raised by two children on the edge of the thundering deep.

"We'll get a little flat. I could go on working, Alex, while you are making your job."

"I couldn't let you do that."

"Why not? It will be our show. One thing this war has done, it has blown away a lot of humbug."

"You are perfectly wonderful."

"But—about our flat?"

They talked of it as they walked across St. James's Park with the sunset glowing behind them. They might have been picking flowers on the edge of a battle-field. Then, the houses overshadowed them in the darkening streets, a little moan of anguish sounded in the heart of each.

"If only it could be now!"

No. 7 Vernor Street surprised them. The shutters were up; Mrs. Sarah had understanding; she had shut up her house for the evening against the khaki crowd. Upstairs supper was laid. Alex St. George found himself kissing Mrs. Sarah, and feeling a little hot about the eyes. Dark Corah gave him a languid, kind hand, and had nothing to say. Kitty had gone to take off her hat.

After supper and its wilful animation, he found himself taking a cheerful leave. Again he kissed Mrs. Sarah—there was something comforting in kissing that solid woman—and shaking hands with the languid, kind Corah. He and Kitty were outside on the landing, and the door was closed. He was aware of Mrs. Sarah talking behind that door like a sympathetic and smothering orchestra.

Husband and wife clung together.

"I want something before I go——"

"Yes, dear," and her voice was full of soothing consent.

"I want to see your room. May I? Just for a minute. Where you sleep, you know. I'd like to be able to think——"

She took him up to her room. It was like herself, small and compact and wholesome, with no frills, but smelling of some perfume. An oak-framed bed stood behind the door, with a blue nightdress-case on the pillow. There were no dresses or hats to be seen, nothing but two pairs of little shoes placed neatly side by side under the dressing-table. Kitty was a tidy person. The blind was down; and she had drawn the heavy blue curtains across the window.

"Oh—my darling——!"

She closed the door, and turned off the light. They lay on the bed together, his head against her throat, her arms round him. She could feel him trembling.

"Kitty—I can't—somehow—not now. I feel it wouldn't be—— Oh, my dear, my dear."

She stroked his head.

"You are not selfish, laddie."

"O—yes I am. But I don't want anything now—but—just—you——"

"I know."

"Sometimes it makes one happier to hold back. You have put some grit into me."

"You're fine, my dear," she said, "you're fine."

So there was no consummation of their marriage in the ultimate sense. He gave her something greater by not taking when she was ready to give. They just lay close in each other's arms, and kissed, and made a passionate, dear murmuring, and then suddenly he drew apart and stood up and, holding her hand, kissed the ring on it.

"Kitty—I'm strong now. I shall—think—of all you have done to me."

She caught his head in her warm arms and held him so for a moment, as though protecting him and praying over him.

"Things will be all right."

She went down the stairs with him and out into the street. They held hands. She walked as far as the hat shop at the corner of Vernor Street, and they stood for a moment under an unlighted lamp.

"To-morrow, Kitty."

"To-morrow."

IV

On that last day there was a break in the ice of Mrs. St. George's stoicism.

Alex had gone off soon after breakfast. He had kissed her, and there had been something in that kiss of his that had troubled her coldness, a secret warmth, a silent—and young—compassion. It was as though the youth in him had left her with the thought—"Poor mater, she's so frozen up. She misses things." For that is one of the puzzles of life, how much other people feel, and what they feel, and between Mrs. St. George and her son a barrier had always existed. Sometimes as a child Alex had wondered about his mother. She had been so

unplayful. Always he had been more ready to run to Cummins—but not in his mother's presence.

He had not told her where he was going, and he had not turned up at lunch, and his mother had noticed that a cover had not been laid for him.

"Did Mr. Alex tell you he would be out?"

"Yes, madam."

So, he had told Cummins! Was it that he had forgotten to tell his mother, or had he not troubled to tell her? It was very discourteous of him. And to leave her alone like this on his last day. She was coldly offended, wounded, perplexed. This secretiveness, this air of independent casualness was new in him, or she thought it new, and she was angered by it. That was her great misfortune. She was one of those congealed women who seem to mistrust all emotion, and to slam a door in the face of emotional expression, but emotion of some sort is inevitable. Suppressed in one direction, it will break out in another, and in Clara St. George's case it took the form of anger. That was the one flame that seemed to colour her ice.

She allowed herself to be angry; anger was the one wine that she would drink, and this particular emotion had developed a devilish facility. She did not know the strength and the fierceness of the creature. For years she had had no cause for a live and primitive anger, and like a woman who has kept a tame leopard in her house, she played with the cat-like, couchant thing.

Her son's last day! And what was he doing with it?

She felt that she had every right to be angry, and that anger was her misfortune, for anger was her wine, filling her with a feeling of flushed rightness. She kept tea waiting for half an hour, but no Alex appeared, and she sat down at her desk and attempted to write letters. She had a moment of suspicion. Could it be possible that there was a girl? But—then—what girl? On his previous leaves she had not known him particularly interested in any woman, and so sure was she of her controlling hands that even at the last hour she did not seriously suspect the existence of a woman. It was just thoughtlessness, or restlessness, or excitement. The war had made people so excitable.

So she waited. And her anger grew chilled. She

waited for him as she sometimes had waited for his father—frigid, accusing, confident. It would never have entered her head that it was possible for a mother to be pitied by her son, or that Alex would ever come to pity her. Pity and pride may be incompatible. She associated pity with condescension, and that anyone might stoop to her was unthinkable.

V

About half past six Mrs. St. George heard the ringing of the front-door bell. She was sitting in front of the fire reading the *English Review*; she rose, made a movement towards the door, turned and resumed her seat.

Cummins let Mr. Alex in.

"Hallo, Cummins."

His face had what Cummins described as "A funny hazy look." He smiled both at her and beyond her.

"Mother in?"

"Upstairs, sir. You'll be in to dinner, sir?"

"Of course."

He left his cap and cane and gloves on the hall table, and went very slowly up the stairs. It had been a day of emotion, and he was in an emotional mood, and very ready to be touched by things, and moved by a sudden impulse. He loitered on the stairs. It became more obvious to him that he had left his mother alone all day, and on his last day. Poor old mater!

And suddenly he decided to tell her. It would be ungenerous not to tell her, and perhaps she would take it better on this last evening. He would blurt it out and get it over. He wanted her to share his emotion. For his impulse was largely unselfish, a sudden turning to his mother, a feeling for her and with her.

He opened the drawing-room door, and saw her sitting in front of the fire with that blue-covered magazine in her hands.

"Sorry, mater; I'm afraid I'm rather late."

She appeared to finish the paragraph that she was reading, before she turned her head. She had meant to reproach him. She had reproached and chided the unseen son, but when he appeared before her in the flesh

she suffered from one of those sudden and wilful congealings. She froze. She did not say any of the things she had intended to say. She became a woman of cold and perverse constraints and inept yet withering silences.

"Yes—you are a little late."

He moved to the hearthrug, and stood there with the confession faltering self-consciously.

"Been seeing friends. They kept me."

She was coldly furious with him and his friends, but all that she said was—"The fire's rather low. Will you put some more coal on? Not too much. We have to be careful."

She did not see his face go blank—and then become stubborn, for she was not looking at him, and he turned and bent down, and with a pair of small tongs transferred half a dozen lumps of coal from the copper coal-pot to the fire. His back expressed a negative blankness. His eyes had a closed-up look.

"The week has gone very quickly. I've ordered a taxi from Prout's place."

His mother's nostrils quivered.

"Yes, very quickly. Cummins knows about breakfast."

He replaced the tongs and stood up, but kept his back towards her.

"No need for you to bother, mater, unless——"

She said very decisively—"I shall be down to breakfast."

"I meant—the station."

"I shall not come to the station."

"Yes—much better."

"I think one can leave that."

She did not say to whom Victoria Station should be left, but her tone implied it, and her son caught the implication. One left Victoria Station to the crowd, to common women, to the crudely emotional, to people who were not ashamed of kissing and hugging, to poor little snivelling girls. And he felt both hot and cold, for to him that place full of the wide-eyed woe of women and the cheerfulness of stiff-faced men meant Kitty, Kitty who could clasp your head in her arms, and make you feel prayed over and protected.

"O—damn," he thought, "I wish——"

But what did he wish? That his mother was the kind of woman who could be left on that station platform holding Kitty's hand? How simple and human and right that would seem. But Kitty, Mrs. Sarah's daughter, Mrs. Sarah who kept a tobacco shop in Vernor Street, though she was a doctor's widow! How right that shop might appear to him, and how wrong it might appear to his mother!

"I think I would rather you saw me off here, mater."

She answered with a slight and consenting movement of the head. She had gone back to consider that other possibilty. Could there be a girl?

"Men prefer it—our men."

"O, quite so," he said; "makes one feel rather a fool. I asked Cummins to pack for me. There is only my valise. I expect she has done it."

"Ring and see."

"No—I'll go and look."

Left alone for five minutes she sat and stared at the fire. Should she go to the station? Did he wish to keep her from going to the station? For if he did she would go. Yet she could not believe in the existence of a love affair, for she was sure that he would have told her about it. She believed that he had always told her everything. It was a mother's right to know everything.

He came back more at ease.

"Quite all right. I shall only have to put my slacks in and roll it up last thing."

He stood looking down at the fire.

"I'll write directly I get across, mater."

VI

At six o'clock next morning it was raining. Mrs. St. George was down before her son, and Cummins unexpectedly wept over the bacon and eggs as she was placing the silver chafing-dish on the table.

Mrs. St. George looked at her sharply.

"Cummins, don't be hysterical."

It was an inarticulate and unhappy meal, and to Alex the taxi appeared as a vehicle of escape. Standing at the window he saw the rain glistening on the black roof of

the cab, and the plane-trees and the lilacs all wet, and he thought of yesterday, and the sunlight on that English landscape. How far away yesterday seemed, and Leith Hill, and the pearl-grey downs.

His mother did not go with him to the front door. He had a last glimpse of her standing between the breakfast-table and the fireplace, watching him with those very blue eyes of hers that seemed to him to be for some unknown reason strangely stern. Her heart-burn was a resentful emotion, penetrated by an inarticulate anger against happenings over which she had no control.

She remained there motionless, until the taxi had driven away. She did not go to the window. She heard Cummins close the front door. She realized that Cummins was making moist sounds in the hall. "O, my lamb, we'll never see you again—perhaps." And Mrs. St. George went out to her with a face of sudden fury.

"Don't be an hysterical fool, woman."

VII

Through the April rain Alex St. George was carried towards Kitty. She was waiting for him there outside the booking-office, wearing the jade-green jumper and the little black hat of yesterday. Her right hand grasped the handle of a wet umbrella.

There was no holding back about Kitty. When he got out of the taxi she put her arms up round his neck and took and gave kisses. Who cared? This English railway station was a human place.

"Kitty," he said, and that was all.

He felt desolate and he felt happy. When he had reserved a seat in the Pullman-car, they stood together on the crowded platform, contemplating each other, all eyes, but blind to all else. Scores of other men and women were equally blind. They saw nothing—perhaps—but one face.

"I'll write every day," said she. "I—know—you will be all right."

"I shall. Have you got that photo?"

She had it in her little bag, and she gave it to him, and he tucked it away in a breast-pocket of his tunic.

"You're there, Kitty. It makes me feel good."

Her eyes had a burning solemnity, but they were tearless.

"Take your seats," came the cry.

They clung together for a moment. He scrambled in, and hurried to his window. He managed to smile. She stood there with a white, grave face, sturdy and small, looking at him intently. The train moved off, and her white face seemed to glide away, those solemn and intent eyes smiling slightly.

St. George sat back in his seat.

"O, damn," he thought, "I wish——"

The train was full of such inarticulate wishes.

CHAPTER V

I

When Mrs. Sarah was not busy in the shop, her favourite place was a chair by one of the sitting-room windows, and from this window she could see the blackened redness of St. James's church, and the grey spire rising above the plane-trees. Across the way the windows of Fream's Hotel confronted her, lavish with white paint and old-rose curtains, and shadowy comings and goings. The window-sill being a low one Mrs. Sarah had a good view of Vernor Street, and the passing of the khaki caps, bowlers, "Trilbys" and cloth caps. Vernor Street was a male thoroughfare, and Mrs. Sarah had discovered the essential sameness of the male. They were calculable creatures. To a gossip who had exclaimed—"Oh, all men are awful!" she had replied—"All men are—just—men, only some of them are more so."

She was a comfortable woman. She did not expect a man to be a hero, or a little St. Paul, or a devoted husband and father, or an infallible fool. She knew man to be a creature of patches, and she preferred him not to be a humbug. She liked a good dinner, and did not deny it, and a well-grilled chop, and asparagus, and chocolates, and a good-looking boy or girl, and fine manners that are fine because they are gracious and kind, and a well-brushed top-hat, and clothes that come out of Savile Row. If the Prince of Wales was to be seen anywhere, she made a point of seeing him. "The dear!" She had liked young Alex St. George. He, too, was a boy who could blush.

But Alex was in France—Kitty had had two letters from him, and Mrs. Sarah was waiting for Cardigan Square to send up some signal, though it might be a storm-cone that would be hoisted. Yes, that was quite

probable. But if Mrs. St. George was a woman of good temper as well as of good family, Vernor Street and Cardigan Square might avoid vulgarity, though warmth was hardly to be expected. So Mrs. Sarah sat and waited. Mrs. St. George should be allowed the first move; it was her privilege; it might be a gracious one.

"Well, my dear, I think it will be up to her. And she's a gentlewoman."

Kitty, being younger and more concerned than her mother, was a little less patient. It was given her to wonder about Alex's mother, and her attitude towards the shadowy Mrs. St. George was human and practical. She was quite ready to be friends with Alex's mother; in fact—she was ready to respond to a mere formal gesture, for Alex's sake, for her own sake, for everybody's sake. Rows are destructive and unbusinesslike, and Kitty was a businesslike little person. But condescension would not be welcomed. She would allow Mrs. St. George a mother's reluctance, but if there was any magnanimity in Alex's mother, Kitty would make the most of that magnanimity. She had seen a photo of Mrs. St. George—Alex had shown it to her—and the portrait had left Kitty with the impression of compact, firm-lipped strong-mindedness. Still—strong-mindedness had its virtues; you should know where you stood with a woman who knew her own mind. But would any woman know her own mind—or know it impartially—on such an occasion?

It so happened that Kitty did get a glimpse of Mrs. St. George in the flesh before there had been any parley between Vernor Street and Cardigan Square. Kitty, the young wife, going to look at the house where her young husband had lived, saw Mrs. St. George come out and descend the steps of No. 77. And Kitty stood and watched her walk away, and found in Mrs. St. George's method of progression no promise of Mrs. St. George's being a "Stooping Lady." Not at all. Kitty described it to herself as the progress of a very dignified woman walking in a procession. Yes, and at the head of it. The upper part of the figure moved with a kind of rigid gliding motion, as though carried along on invisible wheels. She held herself stiff as a post.

Kitty mentioned the coincidence to Mrs. Sarah.

"There doesn't look much bend about her."

"Sure it—was—the lady, poppet?"

"O—yes—I saw her face. Just like her photo. She makes a good picture."

If Mrs. Sarah loved that room above the shop, Kitty loved it also. It might contain a lot of shabby furniture, but its associations were by no means shabby. It associated itself with comings back from school, and buttered toast and muffins, and a tuffet on the hearthrug in front of a blazing fire, and Mrs. Sarah's happy way with people. There was not a piece of furniture in the room that was not an old friend, from the mahogany sideboard, with its two cupboards, to the immense old sofa covered in green cretonne. The room had a white and woolly hearthrug that was shaken out of the window at an hour when Vernor Street was empty of headgear. The carpet was a rose-coloured Axminster, somewhat worn, in the doorway. The sofa held a number of cushions, red, blue, and black. There were two upholstered basket chairs that creaked when Mrs. Sarah sat down in them. The girls preferred the sofa or the hearthrug, and Kitty's favourite perch in winter was the plum-coloured tuffet in front of the fire. Her sturdy little back did not appear to need adventitious proppings. Corah, taller by seven inches, and dark and willowy, liked to curl up in a corner.

This room was home, detached from the shop and the divan, and very rarely did a man ascend to it. The Greenwoods were clannish, and this sitting-room was their castle in the highlands. The three women of the sitting-room were not the women of the divan and the shop; there was the downstairs face and the upstairs face. Men have to be both humoured and kept in order.

In a black and gold cash-box kept in the top right-hand drawer of her chest of drawers, and concealed under a green scarf and a handkerchief sachet, Kitty had locked away five letters from her husband. Five letters in six days, addressed to Mrs. Alex St. George, c/o Mrs. Greenwood, 7 Vernor Street, S.W. And such letters! She was not a sentimental young woman; she asked for more than sentiment, and Alex's letters gave her the realities. He wrote to her as he had talked, as though they were sitting on a seat in Queen's Walk or lying on the turf of

Leith Hill. He was in love with her as she wanted to be loved. He depended on her. Standing no higher than his shoulder, she was yet a compact, human buttress.

He wrote fairly cheerfully, and the first two letters came from a base camp. Later he wrote that he had been posted to a battalion of the — Division. He was going up to join his unit; they were in the line somewhere.

He told her that she had given him back his self-respect and his courage. He called her his "Beloved," and she bent a grave little head over his letters, reading them over again before she switched off the light at night. They reposed under her pillow, to be locked away in the morning. She took her gold ring very seriously.

To the crowd of officer boys she was Kitty no longer, but Mrs. Alex St. George. She had no snobbery. She was mated.

The third letter had contained a significant piece of news.

"I wrote to my mother yesterday. I told her everything, how fine you have been to me. I asked her to go and see you at once, or to ask you to see her——"

He sounded so confident. He was realizing the nearness of death, and seemed to think that the people at home would realize as he did, and be uplifted. But did he realize how shocked Cardigan Square might be? Kitty realized it; she was neither anxious nor eager; she remained upon the alert.

Mrs. St. George might find herself in a difficult situation, but Kitty was ready to give her a fair field. Mrs. St. George had only to behave like a gentlewoman. And she should have no cause to regret it.

Kitty felt that she owed something to Alex's mother. She did owe something. She was the young and the unexpected wife in possession.

II

Sons who tell their mothers everything a week too late can count on provoking maternal exasperation. Granted that youth can be very exasperating, and that Mrs. St. George was not an average mother, and that Alex told

his tale with sentimental and frank ruthlessness. For nothing can be more ruthless than the young male, especially when it writes letters under the stress of strong emotion, and writes them to a woman who has no facility for experiencing any sort of emotion save that of anger.

Mrs. St. George was more than angry; she was shocked; she was furious. And her anger was her misfortune. At this moment in her life when so much depended upon a magnanimous self-restraint, she allowed herself to become a kind of Brünhilde of a woman. This one strong vital emotion, kept like an animal in a cage, and allowed out upon proper occasions to administer a pat of the paw to a servant or a shopman, broke out beyond control. She made no attempt to control it. She let her one wild beast of an emotion go. It ceased to be a dignified emotion.

The deceit of the thing!

Never having been a woman who could regard life as a romantic affair, and having no warmth of compassion in her that could help to temper her condemnation of romance as mere sex foolishness, she felt immediately right with her anger. She allowed it to distort and colour the whole affair. She got it at once into her obstinate, cold head that Alex had been ambuscaded. He had been ashamed to tell her. Of course he had been ashamed to tell her.

But a shopgirl! O, this abominable war! It uncovered all the rawness of life, and reduced gentlemen to the level of shopgirls. And she had been congratulating herself on the fact that Alex had been spared one of these war entanglements. A shopgirl! Had Mrs. St. George been able to use the word "woman" she would have been so much nearer to understanding the situation.

She raged. She assumed at once that her son had been trapped by cheap people, these Greenwoods, tobacconists. Anger itself is apt to be a cheap and sordid emotion, and in Mrs. St. George there should have been a heritage of self-restraint, and of cold, wise graciousness. She should have behaved like a gentlewoman, and she didn't. She behaved like a common woman, but without any of the common woman's redeemings and excuses.

The whole thing was vulgar and abominable. It was

the old tragi-comedy. Her son had been made to compromise himself, and then had been hustled into marriage. Not so mad—of course—from the Greenwood point of view. A nice piece of speculation, or rather—the acquiring of gilt-edged securities. What a sordid business! And her son! And he could sit down and write to her a fool's letter full of crude sentiment. "I want you to be kind to Kitty."

Mrs. St. George rang up Prout's garage, and ordered a taxi. Yes, she would go and see these people.

III

Mrs. St. George discharged her taxi at the upper end of Vernor Street. She had not walked down Vernor Street for some twenty years, and the last time had been when she and Alex's father—up from the country—had stayed for a week at Fream's Hotel. Some of the male St. Georges still put up at "Fream's," which had a reputation of its own, and was both new and old fashioned. Mrs. St. George walked down Vernor Street on the same side as "Fream's," and when she came level with the two bay-trees in their green tubs, she saw her "shop" over the way. S. Greenwood, Cigar Merchant.

A tobacconist's! The very place in which you would expect an entanglement to be staged. And as Mrs. St. George paused outside Fream's Hotel, a couple of laughing officer boys came out of Mrs. Sarah's shop. One of them waved a hand. So that was the sort of place it was, promising something fluffy and interesting behind the counter, a fly-paper of a shop. Mrs. St. George—in her anger—allowed her prejudices to jump at every conclusion.

She crossed the road. Being a gentlewoman she was able to carry her anger as a gentleman should carry his liquor. She entered the shop, and both shop and divan happened to be empty. Corah was behind the counter.

"Mrs. Greenwood—I think?"

Corah observed her with shrewdness.

"Yes."

"Miss Greenwood lives here?"

"I'm Miss Greenwood."

"Miss Kitty Greenwood?"

"No—that's my sister. But her name is St. George.'

"So I have heard. I am Mrs. St. George."

Corah might be dusky and languid, but she was no fool. It was impossible for a daughter of Mrs. Sarah's to be a fool. She had discussed possible happenings with her mother, and she smiled, and came round from behind the counter.

"Alex's mother. I'm so glad."

Mrs. St. George stared. This elder Greenwood girl had what Mrs. St. George called "a good appearance"; and she was neither embarrassed nor too polite.

"It's your sister whom I wish to see."

Corah's smile died away, but her placidity remained.

"I am afraid that Kitty is out for the moment, but she will be back any minute. My mother is upstairs. I know that she will be glad to see you."

"Yes—I think that I had better see your mother."

She pivoted slowly, surveying the shop. Her blue glance penetrated to the divan. Red cushions? Ah, of course! Red cushions! Exactly! And then, a Major-General in a hurry, entering with elderly cheer, fractured that icy silence.

"O—Corah—my dear—a box of 'Green Howards'."

He looked at the lady, and he looked at Miss Greenwood, catching the frost from them, he stood very stiffly waiting for his cigarettes.

"Put them down to me—please."

He departed, and Corah spoke to Mrs. St. George, but without looking at her.

"General Charteris is an old friend of ours. Now, will you come upstairs, please?"

Mrs. St. George was silent, but her silence answered—"I—quite—understand."

IV

Contrasts both attack and repel.

Mrs. Sarah, standing there with her face all pleasant crinkles as she smiled, and her black eyes very bright, met the crisis and Mrs. St. George with impartial solidity

It is probable that she was instantly aware of a clashing of contrasts. She knew at once that she was not going to like Mrs. St. George any more than Mrs. St. George was going to like Mrs. Sarah. It was ice and fire, air and water, cold blood and warm blood, white meat and red. No two women could have been more different, and more antipathetic, and Mrs. Sarah, realizing an intuitive islike, suppressed that most dangerous feeling.

She smiled.

"Please sit down."

Mrs. St. George moved to the sofa. She was very deliberate. She had taken stock of Mrs. Sarah, as a stoutish, short, broad-faced woman with a sleek black head, a bosom, and a humorous and rather spreading nose. Yes, rather a coarse-fibred person, but, like the daughter downstairs—betraying no embarrassment. Mrs. St. George had expected it to be otherwise, and to find these people saucily on the defensive, or eager to please. She was in a hurry with her prejudices, but behind these prejudices—and whipping them forward—was her anger wielding a scourge.

There was a pause, a significant pause, like a deep drawing of the breath after a plunge into cold water. Mrs. Sarah, taking one of the arm-chairs, was very conscious of the chilliness of the atmosphere, and of the peculiar bright blueness of Mrs. St. George's eyes. And that mouth, and those regular and cold features, and the polished tip of that narrow nose! Mrs. Sarah knew the type. It had hands that clutched. It was morality personified.

But Mrs. Sarah continued to smile, and that was to her advantage.

She said—"Are we to congratulate each other?"

Her way of beginning was unexpected. She began with humour, and a touch of roguishness, as a woman of the world might be expected to open such a discussion. She saw a momentary stare of surprise in the blue eyes. Obviously, Mrs. St. George had not expected such a question. And what did it suggest—familiarity, an impertinent and challenging friendliness, irony, stupidity?

She replied with another question.

"Would you mind telling me how long my son and

your daughter had known each other——? You see——"

Mrs. Sarah sat with folded hands.

"Oh—about a week—I think."

Mrs. St. George appeared to respond with a slight movement of the head.

"As I expected. Do you mind—if I am perfectly frank with you—Mrs. Greenwood?"

"As mother to mother!"

"If you care to put it that way. Obviously—my son—who is very young——"

"The same age as my daughter——"

"But—then—I may observe—that a girl of twenty-four——"

"I agree. My daughter manages her own affairs——"

"And this affair——!"

Mrs. Sarah made a little grimace.

"Are we—going to say—such things to each other? Wouldn't it be better——?"

She saw Mrs. St. George's lips retract slightly in a smile that was not a smile.

"I had no desire to stress the obvious. My son—was not frank with me. The first time—— Naturally, one was moved to infer——"

"Yes—one is. I quite understand. But—as a matter of fact, Mrs. St. George—I might have interfered, and I did not. Please wait a moment. I happen to be rather fond of my daughter. She's got a lot of character. No—she's not—what you might infer. Appearances—— I keep a shop. I do pretty well. My girls have been well educated. We respect ourselves."

She looked straight at Mrs. St. George with a kind of imperturbable good humour, and Mrs. St. George looked out of the window. She had met the unexpected. She was up against a solidity, a common sense, a humorous wisdom that met and restricted her prejudices. She was more angry than ever, and her anger was being baulked. She was having to repress it in the presence of this stout and smirking person who seemed to assume an attitude of rightness. And Mrs. St. George had lived with the impression that her own rightness was the only rightness.

She said—"But isn't a mother bound to consider——?"

Mrs. Sarah took her up.

"Of course. It's my daughter and your son. My daughter works for her living. I should like to know—whether your son——?"

They crossed glances.

"My son hasn't a penny."

"You misunderstand me. The question is—can he earn a living? If you are looking at it as a business proposition——"

Mrs. St. George thought she saw an unguarded flank.

"That's inconceivable. I am a woman of property. Let us be perfectly frank. The property is mine for life. If I choose to allow my son——"

Mrs. Sarah smiled.

"Can't we ignore the property? You see, Mrs. St. George, you don't know my daughter. She's rather an independent little person. She didn't marry your son—for an allowance. Believe me—that's true. She married him because she wanted to, and because he wanted her to. That's the human bedrock. I don't know that I am so pleased about it as I might be. But—we mothers——"

She paused. She had put the hot metal of the supreme test into Mrs. St. George's hand. Were they going to be mothers in the gracious, human sense, or were they going to spit at each other like a couple of cats on a wall? The decision was with Mrs. St. George. She had but to make a magnanimous gesture, and Mrs. Sarah would reply to that gesture. She was not expecting Mrs. St. George to be pleased about the marriage, or to pretend that she was pleased, but only to make the best of it, and behave like a woman of sense. She was ready to allow Cardigan Square its prejudices; she had a respect for all that Cardigan Square was supposed to stand for, but Vernor Street was not without its traditions.

She waited. While sitting on the sofa Mrs. St. George had pulled off her gloves, and Mrs. Sarah saw that she was proposing to put them on again.

"Perhaps you would like to see Kitty?"

And then Mrs. St. George, still looking out of the window, let her anger get the better of her.

"Is it—necessary?"

She had done the unpardonable thing. She had sneered. She had let her venom escape, and Mrs. Sarah, with all the douceness and patience and good humour gone from her face, got up from her chair.

"Yes—it is necessary. I insist on your seeing my daughter."

She went to the door, opened it, and closed it with a kind of restrained emphasis. Mrs. St. George heard her calling—"Kitty—I want you."

CHAPTER VI

I

Insistence! A closed door!

Mrs. St. George put on one glove, and rising from Mrs. Sarah's sofa, went and stood at one of the windows. Yes, she supposed that she had better see the girl, and get it over. For a thoroughly intolerant woman the situation was sufficiently exasperating. Nor had Vernor Street behaved as she had expected it to behave, or allowed itself to be overrun by the wheels of her chariot. Mrs. St. George might be a very angry woman, but she was somewhat a woman of the world, and a part of her had to admit that this stout and coarse-fibred person had behaved better—than—— O—well—better than she had wished her to behave.

Meanwhile, dignity—dignity! Though she did allow herself some curiosity as to the face and the figure and the manner of her daughter-in-law. She did not think of Alex's wife as a daughter-in-law, but as an interloper, an adventuress, a little mess of sexual interference.

Yes, she had sneered. But was she not justified in feeling bitter? She stood at the window looking towards the plane-trees and the church, but all that she saw was a plan in ruins, the carefully cherished authority of the mother challenged by a young woman who served in a shop. She looked out past Vernor Street—and beyond Cardigan Square. She was thinking of Melfont St. George's let to an American for fourteen years, of her ruthless economics, of her wiping out of the debts of her son's father. The lease of Melfont had another two years to run, and she had seen herself returning there with Alex. Her anger felt a sob in its throat. She saw the green valley, the fish-ponds, the park full of

old trees, the house with its white portico, the high woods behind it and sheltering it from the north. She saw it as a stately place with shining water. Its dignity was dear to her, the dignity of its old walled gardens and yew hedges, its peacocks, its lawns, its ancient trees. She seemed to hear the cupola clock striking the hour, the wings of the white pigeons beating the air, and the discordant cries of the peacocks. And she realized that she was standing above a tobacco shop, and that her son had married a girl who belonged to the shop.

How impossible!

But what was she going to do about it? Shrug her shoulders and accept the situation? Allow the nice schemings of twenty years to be reduced to ridicule? Could she see herself living at Melfont with a little common creature as her son's wife? Surrender? Compromise? But why should she? These people had captured her son, but Alex was still her son. Had she not to think of his future? If—he survived——?

She stood twisting her glove. In her cold, fierce way she suffered, but not with resignation. No, she would fight. She had every right to fight, ruthlessly, and with every weapon, for her son's sake, for the sake of his future—his future as she had planned it. This abominable war, with its shocks and interferences!

Yes, she would see the girl. That woman had been right in insisting upon it. No doubt the girl was impossible, and there was a part of Mrs. St. George that was eager to magnify the impossible. She was shaping her attitude. She would refuse to compromise, and the more impossible her son's wife should be, the more right would her attitude of no compromise appear.

Money! She controlled the purse. These people were commercialists, though Mrs. Sarah might protest that they were not. They had thought her son was good value, but if one altered the ticket from fifty guineas to twopence half-penny would not that broad-nosed woman with the bosom and the smile appreciate the difference? Also—her daughter? Value indeed!

As for Alex, he was only a boy. He had fallen to a moment's infatuation, a war excitement, a sex spasm that would be bitterly regretted. A year hence—if he lived—he would be seeing his shopgirl as a shopgirl, a

cheap thing, and boring because of its essential cheapness. He would be saying to her—"Mother, I was mad."

Yes, she would not assist his madness. She would make a stand for his sanity, for the inevitable reaction. Had not the war taught one the virtues of ruthlessness?

But what a long time that girl was in appearing! Mrs. St. George glanced at the black marble clock on the mantelpiece and realized that she had been left alone in the room for more than a quarter of an hour. Well, the debt was accumulating. She felt that she had herself under control. She sat down on the sofa, feeling more and more determined to leave these Greenwood people no illusions.

She supposed that her son's wife was dressing herself up for the interview, inside and out. As if it mattered!

II

Half an hour before Mrs. Sarah's closing of that door Kitty had been sitting on a seat in Queen's Walk where she and Alex had sat on the morning of their entering into each other's lives. She had had a letter from him, and she had taken it out with her into the open air, away from all stuffiness, for it was a letter through which reality blew.

"Kitty—I'm afraid——"

Her heart answered that cry. He had poured out the truth to her in that letter, and yet it was by no means a contemptible letter, but in its way very touching and rather fine. He was afraid—most damnably afraid, and yet he was able to love and to laugh. She fastened upon that note of humour, and pondered it. "If you had seen me do a dive into a shell-hole right on top of a few poor beggars who had managed to get hold of a 'dixie' of tea. I upset the dixie and the precious tea. They were awfully decent about it. I had a packet of cigarettes, and I passed them out." He said that the men were awfully decent. There was fear—of course—underneath, but not the sort of fear he had expected. Faces were stiff. "And the chaps—my fellow-officers—do their jobs. That is what gets me, Kitty. It's humiliating and it's splendid. I may be in

a devil of a funk, but I am managing to carry on. I think my chief terror is—the fear of letting myself and other people down." She nodded her head over this. If he were feeling like that he would go on feeling in the right way. She did not want him to write like a humbug. Wives should know, and be able to help. And she was helping—"You are here—always, most vividly so. Do you remember your putting your arms round my head? Well—when the shelling is rather bad I have a feeling that your arms are over my head." That made her eyes deepen, and her fists clench themselves firmly. She was protecting him, yes, the sensitive, lovable, frightened, striving boy in him. Nor was he wholly and selfishly introspective. "I suppose one ought not to tell you a lot of this. I ought to pretend—— But it does help me so, Kitty. Don't think me a craven little beast. You have been so good to me. It helps. I can shove my head against a sandbag, and feel—— It helps to be believed in. I suppose it's because I believe in you —so utterly. One must—you know. It's splendid when you can——"

No, she had no fault to find with that letter. It went right to her heart and to her head. It made her feel deep and good and sad and yet strangely happy. It made her feel that she wanted to fling herself to him out yonder in brave and burning words. Upsetting that tea, and handing out his cigarettes, and seeing the pathos and the humour of it! O, he was all right; he was made of human stuff, and she loved him. Heavens, how she loved him! with her square head and her stout heart.

III

Kitty stood in the doorway.

"I'm sorry I have kept you waiting."

Mrs. St. George remained on the sofa, for with Kitty had entered another unexpectedness, a voice and a face and a figure other than Mrs. St. George had foreseen. She had been waiting for a second Corah, a tall young person, smart, good looking, and self-assured, and she found herself regarding this little bunch of a girl. For that was the descriptive phrase that came into Mrs. St.

George's mind, a bunch of a girl, a little, square, dumpty thing with amber-coloured head, and two very dark eyes staring at you out of a round, fruit like face. Mrs. St. George was surprised, puzzled and antagonized. What —in the name of Eros—had Alex seen in this little, undistinguished creature?

She said—"You did not expect me. I thought it best to see you. I do not wish there to be any misunderstanding."

Kitty closed the door.

"I'm sure there need not be."

She came forward into the room, reminding Alex's mother of a stubborn, bright-eyed child who was not in awe of anybody.

"I hope you mean what I mean, Mrs. St. George."

She took off her hat and placed it on the table. She had Alex's last letter screwed up in her hand.

"I'm afraid not."

"O! That's a pity."

"That may be a question of one's point of view."

"Of course. One sees what one wants to see. And I know—that it must seem—rather sudden."

She sat down in one of the arm-chairs. She appeared quite frank and unembarrassed, and only concerned with the marriage as her marriage. She reminded Mrs. St. George of the mother, but Kitty did not smile. She had an air of immense seriousness. Was this another form of adroitness?

"Certainly—most sudden. But it was not so much the haste——"

She would have said "unseemly haste." And how immovably the girl sat and stared!

"Well—we hadn't much time——"

"But the deceit——"

"I was quite ready for you to be told."

"Indeed! Do you suggest——?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. Alex didn't want you to be told——"

"Isn't that rather suggestive? He was ashamed."

Kitty's dark eyes seemed to flicker momentarily.

"You shouldn't have said that."

"But I do say it."

"Then I'll tell you—why Alex did not want you to be

told. He did not want our last days spoiled. I should not have said that—if you had not used that word——"

They exchanged stares. And Mrs. St. George was unpleasantly aware of the fact that the daughter was being no more apologetic than the mother had been. And Kitty had dealt her a blow, and she would carry the bruise for many days. But it was this little sturdy creature's air of rightness——

"I'm afraid that explanation—does not convince me. Isn't it obvious—that you were in such a hurry——"

Kitty got up and went and sat on the window-sill. The one obvious thing to her was that Mrs. St. George was a very unpleasant woman in a very unpleasant temper. Prejudiced! Yes, stiff with prejudice and resentment. Kitty had been ready to allow her some resentment, but not the production of insults.

"If you say these things—it is not going to make it easier."

Mrs. St. George found a smile, and such a smile.

"Did I lead you to infer——? Surely not. I came here to make it plain—that—on no conditions——"

"O—I see," said Kitty, grave as fate. "Well, it's a pity. I'm your son's wife. I married him because I was in love with him. That's the long and short of it."

Such was her philosophy, and Mrs. St. George began to insinuate a hand into a very crumpled glove. The solemnity of the child! A little, persistent, and plausible creature, speaking of Alex with a possessive familiarity; and every time that Kitty had spoken of Alex Mrs. St. George had felt an inward and cold shudder as though Kitty had mispronounced her son's name.

"I am afraid it is—as you say—the long and short of it. I thought it right to see you——"

"Would you tell me——? Did you make up your mind—before you came here——?"

Mrs. St. George tried irony.

"You can imagine a mother—who has been lied to—as quite unprejudiced."

"You are not being fair to me, Mrs. St. George. I am trying to be fair to you."

"Fair——!"

There was an ironical upward glance of the blue eyes,

but Kitty was busy with Alex's letter, smoothing it out on her knee. She said:

"Wait—please. I do mean something to your son. You don't believe it. I'll show you something I wouldn't show to anybody else, his last letter. Please read it."

She crossed the room, but since Mrs. St. George did not put out a hand, she slid the letter into her lap.

"Perhaps it will help you to understand. I'll leave you alone to read it."

So, Kitty went upstairs and sat on her bed. She wondered what Mrs. St. George would make of that letter. Certainly, it might hurt her a little, but surely if she had any heart in her at all, if she cared as she ought to care, she would try and be fair. But did Alex's mother want to be fair? And Kitty's fists were clenched under her chin. She felt that she would know Mrs. St. George by the way she reacted to that letter. It was Kitty's judgment of Solomon.

At the end of ten minutes she returned to the sitting-room. The letter was lying on the table. Mrs. St. George stood by the window with her back to the door, and it seemed to Kitty that her long back had an uncompromising straightness.

She turned, and her face was quite expressionless. It suggested nothing but a dead, white glare.

"I'm sorry. Please understand—that for my son's sake I can't recognize this marriage."

She passed Kitty and went towards the door, and Kitty let her go. She was saying to herself that Mrs. St. George was a bad woman, as bad as she could be.

CHAPTER VII

I

It was the letter of her son's to his young wife that had made Clara St. George ruthlessly conscious of herself as a very much wronged woman.

Her ruthlessness was the trouble. Kitty, in giving her that letter to read, had given her her woman's opportunity, a humiliating and difficult opportunity no doubt, but to humble herself and ask herself questions was not Clara St. George's way. She accepted the insult. That little, dumpty, honey-headed thing had not only stolen her son, but she had gone out of her way to prove how thoroughly she had stolen him.

That letter! All—"Kitty—Kitty," and protecting arms and sentimental rhetoric—and not a word about his mother in it. The ingratitude of men, their crass sex blindness!

She walked. She walked at a great pace, gliding along like the bust of a pale and outraged Juno carried in a state festival. She found herself in Hyde Park. It was a beautiful spring day, but she felt like winter, ruthless, hurrying to shrivel all succulent green growth. She sat down for a while by the Serpentine, and hated every live thing that moved in the sunshine, the ducks, the children, the impudent and assertive sparrows. Those Greenwood people were like London sparrows.

For undoubtedly she had lost her son, and she raged over it. She did not ask herself why she had lost him, and had she asked herself that question her answer would have been prejudiced and wilful. Alex was like his father. All these years she had laboured to efface the father in the son, to impose the mother on him, and

in one short week he had recapitulated all those irresponsible characteristics. He had come home drunk, he had got himself into a legalized mess with a girl, and he was writing her cowardly, emotional letters. Fear! A St. George afraid, and saying so—to the daughter of a woman who kept a shop! Crying—"Kitty—Kitty"—when he should have been crying—"Mother."

Ah—there was the wound, but she would not let it bleed. Not she! She covered it with clean linen and ice. She set her teeth. She would fight for her son and get him back; and how she did it she did not care. To have to humiliate herself by competing with a girl like that, a little common thing, a little bit of buttered egg on toast! Abominable! But was not this consciousness of outrage in her favour? It absolved her from all compunction. She could treat these Greenwoods as they deserved to be treated, meet adroitness with subtlety, use the knife on the knots they had tied. She had every right to be ruthless, maternally ruthless.

She walked home. She let herself into No. 77. Cummins met her with a confiding face.

"There's a letter, madam."

It was lying on the hall table. She picked it up, and passing by Cummins like a north wind, she went upstairs to the drawing-room and read that letter.

It made her feel worse. He wrote about Kitty. "For my sake, mater dear, I know you will like her. She's so understanding and plucky——"

It was as though he had dashed icy water over her bosom. She caught her breath. She reached for the telephone on her desk, and rang up the exchange.

"Put me on to No. 1999—Central."

She waited.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo. Is that Mr. Furnival's? This is Mrs. St. George speaking, Cardigan Square. Is Mr. Furnival in? What? Gone out to lunch. I want to see him very particularly this afternoon. Busy? But he must see me. He can expect me at half-past two. Write it down. Mrs. St. George will call at half-past two. Very well."

She hung up the receiver.

II

Mr. Furnival smiled.

"O, very well, Carter; I'll see her at two-thirty."

For a man who had spent a great part of his life trying to save people from making fools of themselves, or in preventing them from quarrelling, he had retained a surprisingly sanguine outlook upon men and things. He knew that it was not the law that many of his clients needed, but logic with a flavour of human kindness. People were so quick at getting up on their hind-legs, and a great part of Mr. Furnival's time had gone in getting them down again—with dignity.

He sat down at his untidy desk. He filled a pipe; he dared to and did smoke in his office. He had to smoke, otherwise the business of life would overwhelm him; he made himself smoke and go slow. He was one of those city fathers of 1918, with two junior partners and three clerks away at the war, and his rooms full of eager but haphazard women, and his wife still weeping her eyes out for a boy who had been killed three months ago. Like Mr. Britling—John Furnival was seeing it through. His hair was a little greyer, his pink face a shade more blue, his finger-nails not quite so meticulously cared for. There were times when he had tobacco ash on his waistcoat.

"O, damn the woman——!"

Why did she want to bother him when he was up to the eyes in worries, his own and other people's? He was very familiar with Mrs. St. George and her affairs. A woman who was always in trouble about nothing, she came and demanded advice and then went home and did the very thing you had advised her not to do, generally because it was the thing that she wanted to do.

"Another squabble with that fellow down at Melfont."

Yes, he supposed it was that, and he left it at that. He grabbed some papers, and rang a bell, and began dictating letters to a girl clerk, puffing at his pipe and thinking—behind it all—that he did wish poor Mary could get to sleep without tears. Yet there were occasions when his own blue eyes would look a little

blurred and heavy. Poor lad! Blown to bits at nineteen! Well, anyway, the boy could not have known much about it. And yet the fact that Dick had not suffered seemed to be no consolation to his mother.

But—how—could it be? What a lot of kind and self-humbugging rot one talked!

At twenty minutes past two he put out his pipe, and asked the girl clerk to open the window.

"For my sins—I must smoke, Miss Jones."

"Why shouldn't you, sir?" said she.

He knew that Clara St. George would be punctual. She was. Personally he preferred the sort of woman who was not so heartlessly true to time. She came into his private room like a still, white squall that would not allow itself to break. As usual, she glanced a little despairingly at his untidy desk. Could a man with so poor a love of order be considered wholly efficient? He guessed that she could smell stale tobacco smoke. She was not a woman to be propitiated by an open window.

He had risen from his chair. His freshness had a slightly shrunken look, like that of a ruddy apple that has been stored in a dry place, but Mrs. St. George did not observe it.

She sat down.

"I shall keep you an hour."

"My dear lady——!"

"An hour."

He glanced half-whimsically towards the door.

"No disturbance until I ring, Carter."

"Very well, sir."

He sank slowly into his chair, turning up his coat-tails.

"Well—nothing very serious—I hope?"

She flung the news—so to speak—on his desk.

"Alex has married a shopgirl."

By Jove, so it was as serious as that! Knowing Clara St. George as he did he realized how mercilessly serious it must be to her. He could find her both freezing and raging on the other side of his desk. She was dignity—the supreme maternal ego—outraged.

He said—"My dear lady, these things will happen. Tell me about it."

She told him. She was both cynical and ruthless.

She painted it all in black and white, with a touch of red splashed in when she spoke of Mrs. Sarah. Impossible people, adventuresses—and worse. A tobacco shop that was probably a war-brothel. Full of red cushions and young animals in khaki. And two flashy girls, and an old fat, smirking procuress of a mother. Alex had been trapped. There had been concealment, collusion. He had not told her, no—not till he had reached France. He had been ashamed to tell her. Obviously. And now he was trying to pretend——

Mr. Furnival listened, and watched her, and jotted down a few notes, and examined his finger-nails.

"Trying to make the best of it—is he."

He had to break in somewhere, make head against the north-east wind of her declaiming.

"The best of it——!"

She drew herself up.

"Well—one has to sometimes."

He was finding her a little more exasperating than usual, and life was not quite so mellow as it had been before the war. He was overworked and inclined to be irritable. He found himself thinking of her as a woman who had a live son, while poor Mary—his wife—— But this would not do. He had a duty even to the most exacting of clients.

"Something must be done——"

"But if the marriage is legal——"

"I don't question its legality. Those women are sufficiently clever."

Not for a moment did Mr. Furnival believe that these Greenwood people were all that she declared them to be, for when a woman is in a rage—especially a woman like Mrs. St. George, you halve her statements and still discover exaggeration.

"I want this marriage annulled."

"But, my dear lady, it can't be done. Besides, there are other points of view—Alex's."

"His present point of view. O, no doubt. But, you see, one can alter that."

She smiled like a frosty morning, and Mr. Furnival felt that he ought to turn up his collar.

"Tell me exactly what you mean."

"I can cut off his allowance."

"O, I shouldn't do that," and there was feeling in his voice. "Besides—would it be fair——?"

"I can alter his point of view—with regard to this girl. At present—he thinks her—— Isn't it obvious—that when he realizes that she is shop—soiled——"

Mr. Furnival sat up in his chair.

"You are going to suggest that to him?"

"Certainly."

"But—my dear lady—consider——"

"I shall do what is right. I have seen these people. I shall have the house watched."

She had drawn off her gloves and laid them neatly folded in her lap, and at this point it occurred to Mr. Furnival to ask her why—exactly—she had come to him, and what she expected him to do.

She replied at once: "I want it arranged."

"By me?"

She stared.

"Don't lawyers do such things—or arrange for them to be done?"

He answered her with some sharpness.

"No doubt. But I won't. I will go and see these people if you like—with a perfectly open mind."

She gave him a glare of scorn. Of what use was a lawyer with an open mind? He did not seem to appreciate her point of view, the mother's point of view. She laid great emphasis upon the mother's point of view.

"As a man of the world—do you realize—how impossible this marriage is——?"

"It may seem impossible, but it appears to be a fact."

She talked on and over him. She drew a picture of Alex two years hence, a disillusioned Alex, bored with this little dumpty creature, an Alex who would, in fact, be Alexander St. George, Esq., of Melfont St. George in the county of Dorset. The St. Georges were "county." How could you expect a tobacconist's daughter to share such a position, and to rise to it?

Patiently, he put before her a view of the situation as it was or appeared to be, and not as she wished it to be. Why not try and make the best of it?—for by making the best of it you might avoid the worst. Though he

was shrewd enough to realize—before the hour had passed—that Clara St. George did not want to make the best of it. She wanted her son.

He descended to platitudes, conscious of all the business that he had to get through before dinner-time. "Think it over. Don't be in a hurry. One regrets haste. If you like—I will go and see these people." No, she did not think that was necessary. She had not much use for a man with an open mind. Moreover, he had become aware of a gradual silence, and a reflecting look upon her face, as though she had emptied herself of words. He knew quite well that he had not convinced her, and that she would go away and do the thing she intended to do.

He pushed back his chair, and she rose.

"This has been a very great shock to me."

"Of course."

In the lift she repeated to herself those last words of his. "Of course!" She stepped out of the lift and walked quickly away, down the steps, and out into a crowded street. Her face and eyes had an icy sheen. "Of course." Why had she not seen it before in that way? She had been too-much upset. It was not the marriage that she must attack, but her son's faith in the girl he had married. The marriage could remain provided that Alex was brought to feel that he could not and would not live with his wife.

"Of course!"

He would be both married and not married. He would be hers. No other woman could interfere. All that she had to do was to destroy his affection for and his faith in Kitty.

III

She sat down and wrote to her son.

"My dear Boy—

"I don't think you can have realized what a shock this news would be to me.

"Why did you not tell me before it happened? Was it quite fair of you not to tell me? I think I have felt the

concealment, the lack of confidence, more than anything else.

"Let us be quite honest with one another. Just at present I am so perplexed—so troubled—that I cannot bring myself to any decision—I mean—whether to be glad or sorry—*for your sake*. I am thinking of you all the time, Alex, of your future, and all that is best—for your future.

"I called on the Greenwoods—with a perfectly open mind. I must say that I was a little astonished by the attitude they have adopted. They met me with hostility. The girl seems very young. The mother, well—I'm afraid Mrs. Greenwood annoyed me by the way she spoke of you. I admit that I came away saying that I could not recognize the marriage.

"I think—under the circumstances—that this was the only dignified attitude that I could adopt. I adopted it for your sake as well as for my own. I think Mrs. Greenwood and her daughter ought to realize how finely and honourably you have behaved. At present I don't think they quite realize it as they should. I suppose a girl who lives so much in the atmosphere—of young men home on leave—may have a rather flattering idea—of herself——

"No—I am not bitter. But I must ask you—Alex—to give me time. I am your mother. I feel most terribly responsible; I have a conscience. I am not a woman who is easily convinced, but I must be convinced—one way or the other—before I can make up my mind.

"Remember, my dear boy, that you are the only son I have. God guard you and keep you——"

It was a good letter, adroitly sincere, and yet containing its little drop of poison. "The atmosphere of young men home on leave." She posted it, and sat down to wait, and Alex, reading two letters in a little red-tiled Flanders' bedroom, was at pains to reconcile them. On the whole he had to confess that the mater had taken the news rather well.

As for Kitty's letter—it puzzled him a little. She said so much less about his mother than she might have said.

"I am afraid she is dreadfully upset about it, dear. And yet I can understand. It is so difficult for a mother to realize that a girl can care—as I care. Let us leave it

there—at present. I care—and you care, and that is all that should matter. If you hadn't a penny I should care just the same."

He could look out of the window at a Flemish orchard in bloom. The grass was green. Somewhere, in the far distance—there was a rumbling.

He felt troubled, a little depressed. Surely two women who could write two such letters were not going to quarrel about him when he was in the thick of the most devastating quarrel the world had known? No doubt it was hard for his mother to realize—— Moreover, a fellow had to confess that the mater had an autocratic way with her. She may have made Vernor Street feel a little on its dignity.

As for Kitty having a swollen head—that was nonsense.

He would write a perfectly frank letter to his mother, and try to make her understand what Kitty was to him. Surely, it would only be a question of time, and of two people knowing each other a little better? You might expect a little ice to begin with, and his mother could not be described as an impulsive woman.

But he did feel a little chilled. That grass looked so coldly green. And the apple blossom was beautiful, poignantly beautiful. And those damned guns kept hammering away over yonder!

IV

Mr. Furnival belonged to a club in St. James's Street, and he confessed that as the war dragged on his affection for that corner of the City of Westminster grew more deep and old-mannish. So many things had been lost to him in the war: friends, his son, that sense of security that is so precious to a man who has passed his fiftieth year, and faith in the essential betterment of progress. Mr. Furnival had kept his pink cheeks, but his beliefs and opinions were paler than they were. He was conscious of flux, change, a surge of newness that was very raw and strange. Therefore—perhaps—he loved clubland the better. What consoling names! Whites, Almacks, the Bath, the Carlton, the solid old Reform. You walked along Pall Mall, and entered into some place of pleasant and

spacious security. You felt England round you, your own particular England. You sat intimately in some familiar chair, and saw the sunlight on London plane-trees. Cool, calm solidity, like that of Cornish caves on a still day, admitting the blue sea, but changelessly. The fruit was very raw on the trees these days, and Mr. Furnival hated raw fruit.

Young St. George's marriage—for instance! But ought one to let one's teeth be set on edge by such rawness? Ought not one to remain mellow, yes, in spite of the sugar shortage? Vernor Street was not very far away, and Mr. Furnival, smoking a cigar, and watching the white head of one of the old club-servants, felt moved towards Vernor Street. Why not call there, not as Mrs. St. George's lawyer, but as her son's friend? Hang it all, he had known the boy in an Eton suit.

For life was still coloured for him by the spilt blood of his son, and though the decade's mood might be a very raw one, Mr. Furnival cherished his compassion. He felt more kindly towards Clara St. George's son, and towards all the lads out yonder, and towards all young things. He was not suffering, like many men on the wrong side of fifty, from an attack of renewed youth which could make him jealous of these young men. He was profoundly touched and troubled by his wife's tears.

So, he put on an irreproachable top-hat, and a pair of wash-leather gloves, and left his club for Vernor Street. It may be that Mrs. Sarah was not wholly unknown to him—at least by reputation. He found her in her shop; it was the slack time of the day; the war was still at its lunch.

He raised his hat to her.

"Mrs. Greenwood, I believe?"

Mrs. Sarah smiled at him. She liked an English face such as Mr. Furnival's, and especially so under that glossy hat.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Greenwood."

"My name's Furnival. I'm an old friend of Alex St. George's."

Mrs. Sarah continued to smile.

"And of Mrs. St. George's?"

"No. I don't think I can call myself a friend of Mrs. St. George's. I have not attained——"

"It must be rather like climbing Mont Blanc, Mr. Furnival."

They understood each other from the first. They were two Londoners, two very English souls, and for ten minutes Mr. Furnival sat on one of the red cushions, and was conscious—while sitting on it—of Mrs. St. George's utter lack of the sense of humour. Mrs. Sarah sat on another red cushion, effacing it completely under the solidity of her skirts.

"You are going to have trouble," said Mr. Furnival. "As a friend of Alex's—and as one who happens to know——"

Mrs. Sarah thanked him.

"This may be Canaan to you, Mr. Furnival."

"Not at all. I may be inquisitive, but I am not a spy. Quarrelling is such a waste of time and energy."

"It's more than that. It's a pity. If Mrs. St. George could see it like that—without seeing red! As it happens, I am rather proud of my girls. If a young fellow like Alex gets a girl who is good and wholesome and healthy, with a head on her shoulders and a pretty one at that—what—in the name of the Prophet——?"

Mr. Furnival said: "Exactly. My boy was killed three months ago. That rather cramps the fussiness of one's social style. I would very much like to meet Alex's wife."

"And I—Mr. Furnival—would like you to meet her."

He was taken upstairs. He was introduced to Kitty. He sat on a chair, holding his hat and gloves, while Mrs. Sarah returned to the shop, but presently he had put his hat and gloves on the table, and was lighting a cigarette. And Kitty sat there rather like a solemn child, talking to him very seriously about Alex. She understood Alex from cap-badge to field-boots, and Mr. Furnival began to realize why it was that she understood him as she did.

He had come with an open mind; he went away with a prejudiced one.

"After all," he thought, "it ought to be humanly possible to make the best—of that."

CHAPTER VIII

I

Kitty sometimes wondered whether any woman had put on record how women felt during the war, not as men expected them to feel, but as they did feel. So much of it—of course—was just playing up to your particular man, as she was playing up to Alex, because he needed it, and needed it more than most men did. Moreover, there were men, hordes of them, whom no woman was required to pity, men who had got back into fine, elemental happenings, and who never before had felt so male, however much they might grouse or play for pity.

On the whole she was moved to pity the women more than the men, that is to say the women to whom the war mattered. There were many to whom it did not matter a damn. They—too—had their excitements. Nor did Kitty pity herself, though she lived—so to speak—at the end of a telephone wire, one ear turned Francewards while the other ear was carrying on.

There were times when you could hardly believe that the war was happening, yes—even after nearly four years of it. You got out of bed with the sun shining, and dressed yourself, and came down to the orderly details of an orderly day. You dusted things, and sat down to breakfast, and saw the sun shining, and heard the coming and going in the street. The day seemed so normal. And suddenly the war would get you. Perhaps you would hear the morning paper thrown down with a flop on the shop floor by some casual and indispensable urchin. Or the thought would rush into your mind—"Will there be a letter to-day?" And if there was no letter? You felt a little more restless and strung up; you seemed to be

listening for something. You found yourself a little sharper in the tongue, and were suddenly sorry for it. If there had been an air raid in the night you made a point of shrugging your shoulders. Perhaps you remarked that it was worse for the fellows over there. But was it? Kitty had her doubts. Her feeling of suspense was not an uncomplicated emotion. It was like a three-headed beast crouching in a dark corner.

She was afraid of Alex's death, afraid of his fear, and afraid—in a way—of his mother, though she would not have described her waiting upon Mrs. St. George's silence as fear. It worried her. What was the woman going to do? They had not seen her again, or heard from her, and the only hintings she received came to Kitty in one or two of Alex's letters. Mrs. St. George was very much upset; his mother was a woman who took things very seriously; it was a question of time. Would Kitty be patient? He knew that it was asking a great deal of her—but for his sake—— Mothers were mothers. He said—and she believed him—that he felt a little ashamed of having to write as he did. It was humiliating; but she was not to feel about it in that way. She was the finest little woman on God's earth, and when he came home on leave everything would be put right. He needed her more than ever, her, and her only.

Well, that was what mattered. But she took herself and life much more seriously than she had done as Kitty Greenwood. She was Mrs. Alexander St. George, with a young husband at the front, and a non-conforming mother-in-law somewhere in the background, but it was the vagueness of this background that troubled Kitty very considerably. Being a sturdy and somewhat practical person she liked to know where she was. Dramatic and bothering situations were very well on the stage, but in real life—no. None the less, she refused to be rattled. She remembered the essentials. She kept her eyes on the one human figure.

He needed her; he needed her letters, and never—perhaps—did any man at the front receive more humanly comforting and wise little letters. If she let herself go there was her sturdy, common-sense self at the back of it. At home she escaped into practical interests, wholesome daily activities. She wore her heart much deeper. She

talked less to the young men, and more to the older ones. She was kinder to them all, but with the kindness of a little matron. Sometimes she would catch some elderly and responsible warrior looking at her with a whimsical but wise twinkle. She took herself as a married woman very seriously, and to a certain type of old boy—the best type of old boy—her seriousness was very charming.

"That's a lucky young beggar—your son-in-law," said one of them, who had become a man after ceasing to be a snob.

Mrs. Sarah agreed with him.

"It is a pity his mother doesn't think so."

"Doesn't she?"

"No. But she'll regret it."

"I hope so. After all——"

"You need not apologize for her," said Mrs. Sarah. "I often wonder if Balaam apologized to his ass. Did he? I forget. Kitty's worth a whole cartload of anything that Mrs. St. George could produce. She's my daughter, and I ought to know. Besides, I'm no pauper."

She wasn't. Some people happened to know what her turnover was in the Vernor Street shop, also that she had invested some three thousand pounds in War Loan. Her girls had their own banking accounts. She had brought them up on figures, figures with a personal rotundity and significance. She could remember Kitty at the age of seventeen, lying flat on the hearthrug, with her little cash-box, and an account book, and a stumpy pencil.

"I suppose some people would call us profiteers. Let 'em. We give value."

"My dear," said one of her gossips, "Vernor Street will have helped us to win the war. Encouraged our moral, you know. Lots of poor devils have felt better for sitting on your cushions and being smiled at."

"We have tried to smile."

"That's it. A flip of cheerfulness. Any woman can go and look solemn in a committee-room. And you don't advertise."

"Well—that's my theory. Some one has to carry on. I could have put my girls into munition works or the V.A.D. They have had their choice. They preferred to stay with me and carry on."

"Good business," said her gossip. "I'm not worried

about the war. I'm worried about what's going to happen after the war."

"Ah," said Mrs. Sarah, "that's it. I suppose half the world will be a little bit drunk for the next ten years. Swollen-headed. It will be the plain people who carried on who will do the carrying on. Apply the ice—you know."

She sat solidly on her chair. She invested in War Loan, but she invested in other things as well.

"When the hero-stunt is finished—we shall all have to get back to our figures. Profit and loss, my dear. Half the world will be wanting something for nothing or I'm no prophet. But you can't run a business on those lines, nor marriage, nor an Empire, nor a cat's home. We shall see."

She kept her eyes and her ears open, and so did Kitty. The way to make money is to be in the know; also, to be able to see round the corner. Men who were supposed to know were found to be chatting in Mrs. Sarah's divan, and it was from overhearing two such authorities gossiping about money matters that Kitty took to speculation.

"Buy 'Cobbolds'; buy every shred of 'Cobbolds' you can lay your hands on."

"Something in it?"

"It's bound to boom when the war's over. I happen to know—— You see—I'm——"

Kitty pondered those words. She knew the prophet to be a man of some substance, but she discussed both the prophet and the prophecy with her mother.

"What's your opinion of Major Drysdale?"

"In what way, my dear?"

"As a business man—a man who might be expected to know."

"Pretty sound man—I should say."

"I heard him advising Colonel Howard to buy 'Cobbolds'."

"'Cobbolds?' 'Cobbolds.' Let's see."

"Silk aren't they?"

Mrs. Sarah patted her forehead.

"Wait a bit—wait a bit. Skirts going up. Every little flapper—— Stockings. Something in it. Of course——"

That is how Kitty came to buy "Cobbolds." She

bought £300 worth of Ordinary Shares, at a market price of 16*s.* 6*d.* a share. Mrs. Sarah put in five hundred, Corah an odd hundred or so. If Major Drysdale was in in the know, well—why not make use of his knowingness? He was not the sort of man to advise a brother officer to buy a pup. Kitty deposited the stock certificate with her bankers. She did not foresee the fact that those shares were going to be somebody's salvation a year or more hence.

But if she could be adventurously practical, she could be just as active in the matter of sentiment, though she did not think of it as sentiment when she trained down to Dorking nearly every Saturday and trudged out to Leith Hill. Sitting on a turf slope and looking southwards over all that rolling country with its marching woods and stippling of trees she felt herself as physically near to Alex as she could be. He was over yonder, beyond those dim downs and the sea, a little live figure somewhere in that brown multitude of men. Her man. She would sit and stare, and feel and think. Sometimes the sky was clear, or white winged, or overcast, but it was full of the great question, the question that so many women were asking the unknown: Will he come back? Kitty wanted her man to come back; the whole of her wanted him. There were other women who secretly hoped that some man might not come back. The war might be a liberator as well as a tyrant.

Meanwhile it was June, and she hung suspended between two points of the unknown. Her two wires stretched from somewhere in France and from No. 77 Cardigan Square. Cardigan Square had remained unpleasantly silent, unpleasantly so because of Kitty's summing up of Mrs. St. George as a bad woman, in that she was hard and suspicious and unmovable. A woman with a frozen backbone. Kitty had been prepared for a certain amount of rigidity; she had been ready to allow Mrs. St. George the stiffness, her prejudices; Cardigan Square could not help itself any more than Vernor Street could help itself, and Kitty had been ready to help Alex's mother.

And since Mrs. St. George's silence had continued, Kitty had begun to stiffen herself in response to Clara St. George's rigidity. Her sturdiness was prepared to resist

—though what exactly she might have to resist she did not know. Actually she appeared to be the young woman in possession, therefore—if Mrs. St. George contemplated aggression, it would develop into an attempt to evict the young woman in possession.

But how?

II

Meanwhile, Mrs. St. George was rationalizing her motives and the actions that were to spring from them. Badness, as Kitty understood it, may be nothing more than a person's power of self-persuasion, her knack of dressing up her particular devil in a white surplice, and sending it out upon a sacred quest. The end justified the means. That Clara St. George was able to become a fanatic in her attempt to reconvert and recover her son was no more unnatural than the eating of a breakfast. Good women can be ruthless. Prejudices become principles. We all try to do what we want to do, and some try more successfully and more remorselessly than others. Religion may assist the egoist, that fine, cold sense of rightness.

Mrs. St. George had made up her mind.

She wanted her son.

Kitty was a bad woman, an ingenious little honey-pot, the daughter of that fleshly person Mrs. Sarah. Therefore Kitty could be treated as a bad woman, without compunction, and without consideration. The greedy little shopgirl must be made to disgorge.

Alex had to be liberated. That was obvious. But how complete the liberation was to be might depend upon how much liberation would assist the mother in recovering control of her son. She used the moralities with an a-moral mind. The moralities and her prejudicies seemed to coincide, which was useful. She was going to try and destroy her son's faith in his wife because she—Mrs. St. George—had convinced herself that Kitty must be a wanton. Having made that assumption and translated it into fact, she realized that she had to impose that assumption upon Alex. She had to prove to her son that his wife was no better than she ought to be, and had

been in that state when he had married her. Having pulled his marriage down about his ears and extracted him from the ruins, she would then be able to consider the possible reconstruction—as she wanted things reconstructed.

She was not seen again by Mr. Furnival. The obstacle of the open mind was circumvented. She visited instead a certain firm of solicitors who were experts in the handling of such delicate and indelicate matters. She interviewed the senior partner, a florid, bald-headed, genial person who had an excellent digestion, a nice taste in wine.

"My son has contracted a mésalliance."

Mr. Test, of Test & Crabtree, preferred simpler language.

"Got himself into a mess. Exactly. And you want him out of it. What's the woman?"

"A shopgirl in a tobacco shop frequented by officers. A place with a lounge and red cushions. You can infer—most probably——"

"Red cushions!"

His geniality increased.

"Dubious, eh? Flashy. And you have good reason to believe——?"

"I have every reason to believe that my son was imposed upon and trapped. But I want evidence, convincing evidence——"

"Evidence that is convincing to you, Mrs. St. George?"

"Evidence that will be convincing to him."

He understood her.

"Am I to understand that action will be taken?"

"Of course—my son—when he realizes—what the girl is——"

Blandly, he pointed out that the investigation was being inspired by a third party, which might be a little unusual and dangerous. Vernor Street might react. The responsible and interested person was Mrs. St. George's son. Even sons did not always approve of interference.

She replied with one of her blue glances.

"I consider myself responsible for my son. I have a right to be interested. Surely it is possible to have discreet investigations instituted, to collect evidence——"

He waggled his eyeglass at her.

"Possible—yes. With discretion. Without alarming anybody. Is that the idea?"

"Certainly."

"So—that you might have—a nice little dossier ready—in case—— But by the way—what is—if I may ask—your present attitude towards your son?"

"I have told him my mind is open, but that at present he must allow me time to reflect——"

"You have not recognized the marriage?"

"No."

"Your son believes—that you are thinking it over."

"Yes."

"And these Greenwood people?"

"The women are not fools."

"You mean—they expect hostility?"

"I imagine so. But I am giving them no provocation, no hint."

"I see. You remain in the background, ostensibly to decide whether—for your son's sake——?"

"Exactly. One should be deliberate—I think. One does not want to give the impression of haste, or of anger, or of prejudice. I want my son to understand that I have taken my time, that I have been thorough and deliberate."

"So much more convincing——"

"Exactly. I shall be able to say—'I wanted to be sure, before I opened your eyes.' That is why——"

"I quite understand," said Mr. Test.

III

So, in her letters to her son, she behaved herself with careful self-restraint and discretion. Almost, she made it appear that the marriage had not happened, or if it had happened she was still keeping it judicially poised between heaven and hell. She dropped no poison. She wanted to possess his confidence before she began to administer her poison in carefully measured doses that could be adroitly increased. She had to remember that if Vernor Street were forewarned it might prepare an antidote.

She wrote to Alex every day. She sent him parcels, books, magazines. She was the devoted and unchanging

mother. That he was in danger, that he was no more hers than the mischances of the war might allow, seemed to have the effect of stiffening her secret ruthlessness. The less she had, the more firmly did her grip tighten upon what she had. She looked at life as a woman might look out of her window on a frosty day, to see everything covered with rime, and the brown leaves glued to the grass, and the soil caked in the beds about drooping wallflowers. She was the sort of woman who would have thrown out crumbs to the birds, not because she loved birds, but just for the sense of power that it gave her. Never once did she attempt or contrive to put herself into her son's place or to see life with his eyes.

She shrank from contact with raw emotion, drew in her skirts. She had never known fear, and could not understand it in her son. In fact—she was sceptical about fear. It was an emotional state, a part of that emotionalism that had hurried him into this marriage, and no doubt the girl had used all the emotions and played upon them. Protecting arms—indeed! Her nostrils would grow a little pinched. She preferred the use of the word "neurotic." She shut up Eros in a cupboard. She was the firm, cold, capable nurse.

She wrote other letters to all the various St. Georges and Smythes. She gave them the news with dignity and discrimination. "Poor dear Alex had committed a deplorable blunder. But of course—this war——! No one is normal." She hinted—that if her son was spared to her—she hoped to see him recover his normality when the war was over. The further implications she did not discuss, but they could be inferred.

Old Jermyn St. George, who hated her, chortled considerably over the news. He had loved his brother and had resented his sister-in-law's attitude of rightness. Poor old Charlie had never had a chance.

"Great. Young Alex seems to be getting some back for his father. I hope that girl has the right stuff in her."

He replied with ironical robustness to Clara's letter.

"I have no quarrel with new blood, if it is warm and wholesome. Let me know if anything babyish is expected. I'll offer myself as god-father."

Jermyn had always been a person with the mentality of a Georgian squire.

But he wrote to Alex and congratulated him, and was given an address in Vernor Street. He visited Vernor Street when he happened to be in town. He kissed Kitty. He would have kissed Mrs. Sarah. He was delighted with Mrs. Sarah. "By Jove, that's a woman!"

CHAPTER IX

I

When Alex came home on sudden leave early in August, Mrs. St. George was caught at a disadvantage. He had not warned her of his coming, for he had been pulled out of a trench somewhere in front of Arras, and had been bundled off to Boulogne, wearing his best tunic, a bulging haversack, and an excited face. He had managed to send off a wire to Kitty, but he had not wired to his mother.

Kitty met him at Victoria, and from the moment that he saw her he thought of nothing else for the next twelve hours.

"I've reserved a room at the 'Astor.'"

"O, great! Kitty, I'm so frightfully happy."

He looked browner, fitter and stronger, though there was a something in his eyes that called up her compassion. He appeared both more resolute and more frightened, and though the fear in him had been kept chained up and chattering in a dark corner, at times it managed to look out of his eyes.

In the taxi they sat very close. She could feel him trembling to the spell in her. He put his face close to her hair.

"You do smell sweet."

A little laugh and a little clinging.

"We won't bother about anybody else to-night?"

"No—O, no. I haven't told the mater. It's you, Kitty."

So, Mrs. St. George had no knowledge of her son being in London, and lying in the arms of his young wife. It was a night of little passionate struggles and tender consummations, and of murmurings and intimate chatter, until sleep covered them both with a tired silence. Their

plans revived with the morning. Alex sat up, and, bending over her, stroked her hair.

"Kitty, I'd like to spend four or five days somewhere down the river, would you?"

"Love it."

He was a little shy in the morning, and she liked this shyness.

"I know just the place."

"You seem to know everything."

"There's a jolly old inn about a mile from Maleham, we'll wire them."

"Rather. After breakfast. I say, the sun is shining."

And then his face fell a little.

"There's the mater. Must go this morning."

He looked at her appealingly.

"She's been—rather—O, you know what I mean. Will you come?"

Kitty sat up and kissed him.

"Of course, if you wish it."

"You great little woman. I've been thinking—that if we went together——"

They went, and Cummins opened the door of No. 77 to them.

"Well—I never—Mr. Alex!"

"Cummins, this is my—Mrs. Alex St. George. Leave, yes; rather sudden. Cummins and I are very old friends, Kitty. Aren't we, Cummins?"

"I should say so, sir. Glad to see you, madam."

He was both nervous and excited, and the women, after glancing in a friendly but questioning way at each other, looked at him.

"Is my mother in?"

"Upstairs, sir, writing letters."

"We'll go into the dining-room, and give her a surprise. Will you tell her, Cummins? Mr. and Mrs. Alex St. George."

Cummins went upstairs, but she did not hurry. Mr. Alex's marriage was news to her, an astounding piece of news, but she had to suppose that it would not be so astounding to her mistress. Because Mrs. St. George must have known, and remained silent about it. No, Cummins did not suppose that Mrs. St. George had liked it; she was not the sort of woman to like it. And how

long had Mr. Alex been married? Pretty little thing, too, with nice eyes. Yes, and with a will of her own, by the look of her.

Cummins did not know what a bombshell she was casting when she opened the drawing-room door and made her announcement. Mrs. St. George was writing a letter, and it happened to be a letter to Messrs. Test & Crabtree on certain information she had received from them.

"Mr. Alex is downstairs, madam, with Mrs. Alex."

Cummins never forgot the look on Mrs. St. George's face as she turned in her chair. Her mistress's face seemed to grow all pinched and old; the eyes flared for a moment, and then became ice.

"What?"

"Mr. Alex, madam, home on leave; rather sudden, it seems, and Mrs. Alex with him. Mr. Alex wished me to say——"

Mrs. St. George rose from her chair.

"It—is—very sudden. Will you ask Mr. Alex to come up here? Mr. Alex—not——"

"Only—Mr. Alex, madam?"

"Certainly."

Cummins closed the door, and looking frightened, went downstairs. She was no fool. She knew that the message she had been given to deliver partook of the nature of an ultimatum to Mr. Alex and of an affront to his wife. Cummins was too much of a partisan and too soft-hearted for the proper delivering of ultimata and affronts. What was she going to do about it? The dining-room door was half open, and she had made a noiseless approach over the thick hall carpet. She put her head round the edge of the door, and saw those two young things standing side by side at the farther end of the room. They had their backs turned; they were looking up at the portrait of the Waterloo St. George. The St. George of the Great War had his arm round his wife's waist.

"Over here is my father."

They moved together, and Cummins drew back her head.

"You are like him, Alex."

Kitty was looking very solemn in the presence of the St. George portraits. To her they appeared as the hostile

faces of dead grandees, scrutinizing the little modern creature, this tobacconist's daughter. She was daring them and her husband's mother. She was trying not to feel self-conscious in the presence of a possible attack. She had glanced at herself in a mirror, and had found little to quarrel with in her hat and dress. The daughter of Mrs. Sarah knew how to dress.

But the big, cold room, with its portraits and its atmosphere of aloofness! She realized Mrs. St. George in it, and the Alex whom she did not know, the Alex of Melfont St. George's and Cardigan Square. The war Alex was hers. She felt his arm round her. And what a long time his mother was taking to come downstairs.

She said:

"You all look such tall people."

Cummins, peeping through the hinge-crack of the door, saw the sudden downward glance young St. George gave at the serious and glowing face, as though his wife was the most wonderful thing in the world to him just then; which she was.

"No—I'm blessed if I'll take in that message," said Cummins to herself, and tiptoed to the top of the kitchen stairs. "Let her take it herself—if she can't feel better than that. She can sack me if she likes."

She went below and poured her rebelliousness and its inspiration into the ears of the cook and the between-maid. She was in the midst of it when the drawing-room bell rang.

Cummins sat down in a chair and took off her spectacles.

"She can ring. I'm not going up. I don't care. She wants to ask me. Why can't she come downstairs like a mother and a lady?"

II

Mrs. St. George was asking herself much the same question, but as a mother, and an angry woman, and not as Cummins's "lady." She stood by the Adam fireplace, very tall and straight, still waiting for Cummins to answer the bell, and wondering why she did not answer it. She rang the bell a second time, keeping her finger on it for

fully fifteen seconds, but the lack of response from below left her to tackle her own problem.

She walked to one of the windows, and looked down into the square, but with eyes that saw nothing of any happenings there. What was she going to do? Descend or let Alex come up to her? And supposing he brought the girl up with him? She did not wish to see Kitty; she imagined that this sudden intrusion had been conceived and planned by Kitty; it was a piece of bluff, an attempt to make Mrs. St. George put her cards on the table. Emotional bluff, perhaps! And Alex had gone to his wife before coming to his mother! No, she would not go downstairs to them; she would wait; Alex should come up to her.

She resumed her seat at her desk and with every appearance of impartial calmness went on with the writing of her letter. Yes, an attitude of calmness, a severe and judicial dignity. She could say to him—"My dear boy, I am not acting from spite or pique or prejudice. I have considered—this marriage—deliberately. For the sake of your future happiness I refuse to recognize it. Some day I think you will agree with me." She would let herself go as far as that, but no further, and she was wise. She would exercise restraint. Silence, a dignified and kind silence, can be very suggestive. It might make him wonder, ask himself questions, look at his tobacconist's daughter with enlightened attention.

In the dining-room below Alex was growing restless. It was like waiting for zero hour, and wishing it would arrive.

"I wonder what's happened to the mater."

He looked at Kitty, and Kitty gave him a serious and faint smile.

"Go up and see."

"Will you——?"

"No, I'll wait here."

He hesitated; he betrayed a sudden impatience, but it was not inspired by his wife.

"I say—it makes me feel mean. Cummins must have told her. I'll go and see."

He hurried up the stairs, while Kitty stood in the midst of the family portraits, knowing that the battle was to be joined, and that it was to be fought by two

women who would not see each other, but who would remain in different rooms. Alex was the field of battle, Alex and his emotions, his impulses, his sense of rightness, his weakness and his generosity. Two women drew him different ways. She pressed her teeth against her under lip, listened and waited. She was glad that he had had that night with her. What could the other woman do and offer?

Alex was in the drawing-room.

"Mother! Didn't Cummins tell you——?"

There seemed to be a pause. Mrs. St. George was laying down her pen, and turning to look at her son.

"Yes, Cummins told me——"

"But—mother——! You might——"

She met him with a sort of cold yet affectionate serenity. She was admirable.

"Alex—I can't admit—I'm sorry, my dear boy, but I have my reason. You are my reason——"

"But, mater, you must see my wife——"

"My dear, I cannot see her. Please realize—that I feel responsible. I know what I am doing. I have had time to consider—— I have considered——"

"But, mater, I ask you——"

"My dear, you can ask me anything but that. I—and this house are the same; everything is the same—but that."

And then she saw her son as the son of his father. He behaved just as Charlie St. George had behaved on certain rare occasions. He went very white; his face looked twisted; his eyes lit up and out.

"Mother, it is not fair. You shouldn't put me in a corner like this. I'm in earnest. It's not fair to either of us. Kitty is my wife."

His mother remained perfectly still.

"I am not thinking of your wife, Alex; I am thinking of you."

His whiteness changed to red.

"But—I—have to think of her. It's not fair. It's an insult."

"My dear," she said, "I'm sorry——"

"You know that I——"

"Alex, a man has to choose. I think I know quite well how you will choose. We disagree. But I am your

mother, and shall always be your mother. Nothing will change me. But—some day——"

He stared at her, and then turned sharply to the door.

"I shan't regret it—never. You won't understand. You won't give her a chance. It's just snobbery."

"No, my dear, not snobbery—but loyalty——"

"Loyalty!"

"To a tradition. The tradition—that a girl should be—what a man——"

But he made a sort of inarticulate sound, and went out and closed the door. Kitty heard him descending the stairs; he came slowly. She went out into the hall and met him. Her face had a grave, white shine.

"I know, dear; I don't mind."

He caught her and kissed her.

"You dear; you great little woman."

They went out of the house together holding hands.

III

At the "Astor" a telegram was waiting for them from the "Bear" at Maleham.

"Room reserved for you."

Kitty said: "Shall we go—this afternoon? I'd love to go."

He folded up the telegram, and on his face was a little inward smile.

"It's green and quiet down there. I want to forget. I shall—with you."

Afterwards there was lunch with Mrs. Sarah at Vernor Street, a Mrs. Sarah who asked no questions and raised no problems, but who gave a man his leave as he wanted to have it—poor lad. After that they did an hour's hurried shopping; Alex needed some pyjamas, a few collars, and a new tie; also, he bought Kitty chocolates and would have bought her anything on earth that she might have asked for, had he been able to afford it. But she would not let him buy her many things. "After the war, my dear, we may need all our money." He accepted this as wisdom; he felt her to be as wise as she felt him to be carelessly generous. Always, probably, he had had plenty of money. She noticed that he was nice to the

people behind the counter, and considerate, much more considerate than a girl would have been.

Standing beside him as his mate, the young wife who had known his embraces, she was yet more aware of him as a stranger. During the war the mere physical relationship became so easy, a rather primitive act, begun and consummated in haste, when all physical states could be so transient. You took what the day gave, and more than it could give—if you were greedy, and Kitty was not greedy. But this man of hers, what was he? How would they stand to each other when the spoilt children and the young heroes had become very ordinary young civilians? Though Alex was not ordinary, because he was hers, and because she had felt responsible for him almost from the moment when she had seen his reflection in the mirror of the Vernor Street shop.

She had to realize her Alex, and that was what Maleham was to be to Kitty; conscious, deliberate realization. They drove from Maleham station in an ancient waggonette, down a lane that ended at the river. Here stood the Bear Inn, black and white under elms and chestnuts, with an orchard going down to the water, all green and still and empty, a place to make you yawn, or dream, or weep. But once upon a time—men—men in grey frocks had accomplished things at Maleham; they had built the stone tithe-barn in the meadow across the lane where ash-trees threw a flickering shade; a gable-end of their refectory still pricked an ancient ear; but the grey monks were dead and forgotten, and since their day Maleham had accomplished little that had endured.

To the moderns, Maleham was the "Bear," green willows, the river, empty meadows, overshadowing beech-woods on the hills, beer, boats, a restful greenness to the few, secret week-ends to others. To Kitty, Maleham was Alex's desire, and her need to know her Alex, a secret corner where she would have him all to herself, to be loved and realized and studied. Kitty was a Londoner; she had no particular passion for green grass as such, or for dewy meadows, or moonlight among the willows. The grey monks had accomplished sanctity, a scheme of living that was theirs, and Kitty—the modern—was all for accomplishment. She was not a dreamer, and if she had

day-dreams, they were practical and human and wholesome; she had no cobwebs in her head.

But Alex was a dreamer, and her virtue lay in her being able to realize him as a dreamer. He could lie on his back under a tree, and look at the sky and see something where there seemed to be nothing. She wanted Alex, though why she wanted him she did not quite know. The need was not merely physical. It had begun with compassion. But she would go on wanting him; she was quite as possessive as Mrs. Clara, only more humanly so. Then for the moment he was wholly hers in this green and secret corner, yet, to Kitty, Maleham was no more than a half-way house. She had to keep her Alex and to know him, to make him hers in a way other than that of sleeping together. She understood that marriage had to be a communion of heads, as well as of hearts and hands.

Deliberately, she set out to make him hers. She had begun to realize how little mercy she might expect from Alex's mother, and so it was necessary for her to mean more to Alex than his mother did. That was obvious. She had not had Mrs. Sarah for her mother without being made wise as to men and their ficklenesses. She herself was not fickle, or she did not feel that she would be fickle because she was built on sturdy and enduring lines. She was not easily bored. So much of the fickleness—the desire for change—is the result of boredom, of an uncertain and a flickering vitality.

This husband of hers, this man-boy, what was he? What did he believe in, what did he desire, what were his objects and his ambitions, if he had any? What were his habits and appetites, and his prejudices and his tricks? For everybody had their tricks. There was the Alex that she knew, the wide-eyed, freckled and rather sensitive creature, with a mouth that was not too firm, and a skin that was girlish. He was a clean lad, what people of his own class would call a nice lad. He might be something of a child, lovable, but a little indefinite.

What was the real Alex like? What would the grown, post-war Alex be, if there was to be a post-war Alex? She clenched her fists and swore that there should be a post-war Alex. And then she felt that she had to find out. She had to go behind his mother and his father, behind those St. George portraits, behind Cardigan

Square, and Melfont St. George's back to the essential man in him.

IV

In confronting the future—that very hypothetical future in which the sex experience and the war and their honeymoon would be no more than incidents—Kitty showed the courage and the broad sagacity that she had inherited from Mrs. Sarah.

She did penetrate Alex. In those few days at Maleham she found out as much about him as it was possible for her to discover. He was a dreamer, and he was a little indolent. He liked to lie under a tree or at the bottom of a punt, or to idle along the towing-path under the willows. He would stare at the water or the sky; he liked to talk, to get into some secret green corner and sprawl with his head on her lap and talk with his eyes looking up at her while she stroked his hair.

They did a great deal of talking. He had a natural frankness that was very appealing, and an extraordinarily sweet temper. They discussed his mother, and the problem of her hostility, for obviously it had to be discussed.

"Of course—it will come all right; it must do. She will have to realize. I've been glad, and I've been sorry."

"Mothers can be jealous creatures. Even—if I had been someone else. But then—our shop! I trapped you—my dear——"

"You saved my self-respect."

She looked over him towards the river.

"She will never believe that. But why are you glad?"

"It has brought us together, hasn't it, Kitty? as nothing else could have done, made us know each other. You have been so very fine about it. I'll make it up to you."

She knew that he was utterly sincere; his devotion was vivid and impulsive.

"So long as you want me, and go on wanting me," she said, "there will be nothing for us to fear."

Behind all this greenness, beyond the gently gliding water and those summer fields, she felt his dread of the war, his dread of going back. She held his fear in her

arms, and that was her justification and her joy. She knew that he wanted to forget, as much as it was possible to forget, and with all her strength and her tenderness she set herself to help him to forget.

What a boy he was! A dear boy. She felt herself to be as much his mother as his wife. She would let her consciousness dwell upon him as he lay with his head in her lap. She began to know every bit of the external part of him, the way his hair grew, that one big freckle over the right eyebrow, how his glances seemed to lose themselves in space, his warm, eager and rather uncertain mouth, the delicate texture of his skin. He appealed to her as a very transparent thing, a creature of swift responses, sensitive, not too clever, but lovable—O, very lovable. His very flexibility appealed to her sturdiness. In a way he was weak, in that he was easily and generously influenced, but if he was moved in the right way he had a certain sensitive strength. He would be big with big people, and rather inarticulate and helpless with the forcefully mean and the greedy. He had his principles, but he would be inclined to let the unprincipled rush him off his feet and submerge him.

There was one place on the river that he particularly loved. They would punt up-stream, tie up under some willows, and climb out to a grass bank that lay screened by old thorn-trees. Across the still water lay other meadows, secret and empty, stretching to the immense and silent greenness of towering beechwoods. There was the blue sky, and the passing clouds, and a few cattle, and an old farmhouse away on the left, red and white among some trees. Swallows skimmed. Sometimes they saw the blue flight of a kingfisher.

There seemed to be comfort for him in those fields; they were as pleasant and as reassuring as Kitty's lap. So peaceful and unstressed.

"It would be rather jolly to farm after the war. How would you like it?"

He drew her hands down under his chin.

"Sounds so peaceful, doesn't it? Growing things, instead of destroying them."

She understood him, and how those green fields appealed to him. Like thousands of older men, soldiers by force of circumstance, he loved to call up into his

mind a vision of peaceful living. It gave him, somehow, a sense of security; it made him feel that the vision of the afterwards was the permanent thing, the war a ghastly interlude. Also it helped him to believe that he would survive.

Kitty could not imagine herself on a farm, but she let him have his vision.

"I'm a London sparrow, my dear. Should I have to learn to milk?"

He thought not. His notion of farming was a very gentlemanly one. You walked about with a gun; or rode, and consulted with your bailiff.

"That wouldn't be necessary. We'd keep a car, and a horse or two."

"Would it pay?"

"The farm? Of course, we should have to go into all that. If the mater——"

She looked down into his rather too trustful eyes.

"Boy, we must remember that we may have to stand on our own feet. If your mother——"

She saw his eyelashes flicker.

"O, she'll come round; she must. You see, all the money is hers as long as she lives. My father left it that way. I often wonder—— He died rather suddenly."

"How, dear?"

"Hunting."

Her intimate mind-picture of Alex grew. She had begun to realize him as one of those men who like to be gently coerced. His very good nature, indolent and happy, waited upon life as upon a trusted nurse. Mrs. Sarah had told her that many men were like that, and good men, too. "Ride a beast of a horse, my dear, and yet come home and leave a woman to handle the reins." Well, it might be so with Alex. He seemed to trust her better than he trusted himself. There was nothing bustling about him; he had no swagger; he was no cave-man. Kitty would have fought a cave-man tooth and nail.

She loved him as he was. At night his head came so easily on to her plump shoulder, or into her bosom. She was more strongly sexed than he was. Her arms gripped tighter.

Even in those most intimate moments he was a little shy and sensitive. Always things would be sensitive

between them. He had asked: "May I——? You are so wonderful, somehow." Yes, she loved him as he was. She had her own poise, her compact dignity, her love of accomplishment. A boisterous male thing, taking her and life for granted, would have clashed with her sense of personal efficiency.

At all events, she had taken some of her philosophy on credit from Mrs. Sarah. She had not had the complete experience that would prove to her what children some men are, and that your successful woman and wife thinks of them as beloved children. Kitty would reach the other side of a problem before Alex had been conscious of it as a problem, and would be ready waiting for him, to applaud his solution of the problem if he solved it in the right way. A man's footsteps may be planted in the foot-marks that the woman has trodden. She may remain quite still during his male outbursts, his moments of accomplishment, even though they be the mere smashing of toys.

V

Thus, under the beams of the Bear Inn and the willows and orchard trees, Kitty learnt to know her Alex. Though her problem was not only to know him, but to keep him, in spite of the war, in spite of his mother, in spite of Melfont St. George's.

What were the possibilities? Alex might be killed. But her strong little arms thrust this possibility away. It seemed to her that his mother, and all those St. George and Smythe people, were more menacing than the war, and especially his mother. Such women can command powers of coercion: they can distort.

Had not old Jermyn St. George said to Mrs. Sarah—"She'll never forgive you. She's a sort of glass woman with an electric bulb for a heart. I know her. She'll try to get her boy back."

Yes, and all those other and various St. Georges, would they not rally round Alex's mother? In refusing to recognize this marriage they would exert pressure, a slow and sinister pressure, upon an impressionable nature. Pressure can distort an object and a situation. It might

distort Alex's ultimate impression of what his marriage was and might be.

No, Mrs. St. George and Alex's people must recognize her. She must compel recognition, make so sure of herself as his wife that she would leave them no alternative.

"If I have a baby," she thought.

A child was a solid human fact. You could not poison it, or distort its rightness, or argue its existence away. A child would be so final.

She smiled in the darkness over Alex's sleeping head.

But what a silly business! And a baby might be a bit of a complication. It would mean two children, Alex and it. Yet five years hence, perhaps, the St. Georges would have accepted her, and made it their affair to forget that they had quarrelled with Vernor Street. They would refer to her as a doctor's daughter. They might even approve of her as a wife and mother at Melfont St. George's.

Yes, Melfont St. George's! She felt herself quite capable of rising or descending to Melfont St. George's, of managing Melfont St. George's, of realizing herself as Mrs. Alexander St. George. Of course! She was a daughter of Mrs. Sarah.

And she loved Alex, and she would go on loving him.

She touched his sleeping head gently with her lips.

CHAPTER X

I

THREE days before the end of young St. George's leave they left Arcady for London, returning to an anonymous niche in the Astor Hotel, a kind of hole in a cliff, and here the wind of the world's happenings seemed to blow so keenly that Kitty could feel her man's soul shivering. He had hated leaving Maleham. In the train his eyes had had that old frightened look.

"Happiest week of my life, Kitty."

She had sat very close to him.

"O, there will be other weeks like that—weeks when there will be no going back."

It was plain to her that the hotel troubled him, for it was full of the brown flux of the war, a great cage in which the human senses were both scourged and imprisoned. At dinner he looked at the men and women as though he saw them raw, naked emotions sitting at tables, and eating, and drinking, and lusting, and laughing. He had imagination, and that was part of his trouble, and why he was what the doctors called a "martial misfit." He had seen dead men, mangled men. The war gave you horrible moments when you saw things as they might be, a bloody head instead of a champagne bottle on a table, or a woman—a woman like that dark little thing over there—being embraced by a brown corpse.

He said to Kitty: "Beastly place, this. Makes you feel you are at a station—saying good-bye."

She saw his eyes strangely big and vague across the table.

"We can leave to-morrow."

"I'd rather. Funny, you look all dim, and your voice seems a long way off."

That night he had one of those monstrous dreams that tortured some men during the war. She woke to find him struggling and uttering wild words; for some moments he struggled even with her; one of his elbows struck her mouth and bruised her lip.

"Dear, it's all right, I'm here."

She held him fast.

"Kit—O—my God—I—thought——"

"There, my darling, put your head here."

He lay in her arms, trembling and panting, while she comforted him with the warm strength of her little body. He was hers. Never before had she felt him so much hers. But next morning he saw blood on the pillow, and her wounded mouth.

"Kitty—how——? Did I——?"

She was standing barefooted by the bed. She seemed to glow in her white gown.

"Nothing——"

"O, my dear."

He went down suddenly on his knees and embraced her, pressing his head against her warm body.

"What a rotter I am! Getting scared—even in a dream—and hurting you——"

"It hasn't hurt me," she said, "my dearest."

But she loved the hotel no more than he did. It was she who packed, while she sent him to pay the bill; she ordered a taxi; she took him to Vernor Street, and that night he slept with her in her own little room. And he slept well, though she lay awake for a long while in the intimate narrowness of that little bed, feeling him as her human purpose in life. Also, she was thinking of something that she would have to say to him on the morrow.

She said it while they lay awake together with the light diffusing itself dimly through the blind and the curtains.

"You must go and see your mother."

He did not answer at once.

"Yes, I know. It's beastly of me—but I don't want to see her. It might have been so different."

"It may be different——"

"Of course—— It must be——"

"But not quite as you think, dear. You see, if I have a baby——"

She was aware of his face turning quickly and coming close to hers.

"Kitty! Good Lord, I hadn't thought of it, somehow. Of course. I'll tell her—that. Shall I? It ought to make her realize——"

"I think you might tell her. Perhaps——"

Alex kissed his wife.

"It must," he said.

Not till the afternoon did Alex set out for Cardigan Square. A newspaper boy was running along Vernor Street, shouting the news of Haig's great drive on the Somme, and Alex bought a paper. He turned to glance up at Mrs. Sarah's window, and saw his wife's honey-coloured head there. He fluttered the paper at her.

"Great news! More prisoners—thousands of prisoners. They seem to have got them on the run."

"It's coming at last—Victory."

He took the paper with him to Cardigan Square, with Kitty's "Victory" running in his head. There was a little murmur of victory in the air, and it gave him confidence, and a new hope, and he needed confidence for that meeting with his mother. Surely she would relax a little when he told her——? Even the plane-trees in the square seemed green and big with the news, and the sparrows more cocky. He stood on the familiar steps and rang the bell.

An under-maid opened the door.

"My mother in?"

"Yes, sir. She has a lot of ladies with her, though."

"A committee-meeting. I'll wait in the dining-room. Where's Cummins?"

"Cummins has gone, sir."

"Gone!"

"Nearly a week ago, sir."

His face clouded over. He went into the dining-room, and sitting down by one of the windows, began to read the paper, but from the welter of news emerged the fact that Cummins, dear old Cummins, had left them after all these years. Cummins, with her plain and pleasant face, and the kindly glimmer of her spectacles. Had she gone of her own free will, or had his mother sacked her? If so—it was rather abominable.

He waited. Three-quarters of an hour passed before

the committee came down the stairs and dispersed itself with a busy and cheerful chatter. Alex stood at the window. When the hall was empty, he went out and up the stairs, taking his paper with him as though the good news in it continued to give him confidence. The drawing-room door was shut. He opened it and saw his mother sitting at her desk, just as she had been sitting there on that day when she had refused to see Kitty. How changeless she was! Nothing seemed to have changed. Only old Cummins had gone.

He stood in the doorway.

"Not disturbing you, mater?"

He saw her chin, and the straight line of her forehead under her neat fair hair.

"Oh—it is you, Alex. Come in. I have a few notes to make."

Her voice was level and austerely kind. She spoke and behaved as though nothing had happened, as though she had seen him less than an hour ago. She went on with her writing. He sat down in an arm-chair behind her, and re-opened his paper, and felt chilled and weary. Five minutes passed. She began to sort out her papers and to put them away.

"The news is very gratifying to-day."

"You have heard," he said.

She continued to talk over her shoulder.

"Mrs. Grey brought in a paper. Have you seen one?"

"I bought one on the way here."

"Splendid news—— Those wretches have had a terrible beating. Most encouraging—too—after what happened in the spring. And with the Americans, too, arriving by the hundred thousand."

She talked on, easily, coldly, with admirable composure. She asked no questions. She did not ask him where he had been, or what he had been doing, or what he was going to do. It was as though a certain person and a certain situation did not exist, and she was ready and able to ignore everything outside No. 77 Cardigan Square. She might be giving him to understand that he was her son, and that when he entered her house he was nothing but a son.

But the man in her son protested. Always she had treated him like this. He could remember boyish pro-

tests, moments of young passion congealed by her saying quite calmly, "Your hair is very untidy; go and brush it." But this was no childish protest to be crushed, and he began to be full of an eager resentment against her studied concealment of all curiosity. Why didn't she ask him——? Why didn't she give him the inevitable opening?

"I've been down in the country, mater."

"Have you?"

"Down at Maleham."

"On the river—I think."

Her voice was bright and busy, like notes neatly and clearly struck on a piano. He wished she would stop fiddling with the papers on her desk.

"Yes, we stayed at the 'Bear.' The weather was perfect. Kitty and I——"

She spoke over her shoulder.

"I do not wish to hear anything—about your marriage——"

"But—mater—— I have got to talk to you about it. Why can't you take it seriously?"

"I take it so seriously, Alex, that for me it does not exist."

He felt himself flushing, growing angry.

"But it will have to exist. It's possible—that Kitty and I may have a child."

She turned her chair at that, and looked at him with a blank, blue stare. She had actually forgotten that there might be a child! It was monstrous and absurd, but she had forgotten it, and after that one steady stare at her son, she turned again to her desk, and extricating some papers from a pigeon-hole, began to handle them. Her voice, when she used it again, was not unlike the crackling of paper.

"I'm sorry—but I should be inclined to regard that as a disaster——"

"Mother——!"

He was on his feet.

"What do you mean?"

"If it is your child, Alex."

"But—why? Don't you realize, mater, that it would prove——?"

She seemed to be considering the paper in her hand.

"It might prove nothing."

"Mother—that's nonsense—I don't understand what you mean."

"You are very blind, my dear. But just at present I do not wish to discuss the matter—more intimately. Later—perhaps—when you are a little less blind."

He walked up and down the room once or twice, and then came back to his chair.

"Supposing I'm killed?"

She seemed to consider some point before returning the papers to their pigeonholes. She felt the need for pausing, for reviewing the problem. Had his blurting out of the fact that his wife might have a child altered the position? Could it not be used——?

"I have a feeling, my dear boy, that you will not be killed. Please don't harrow me. Isn't that rather unfair?"

"Sorry, mater."

"I have feelings. I am trying to control them—for your sake——"

"But you said——"

"Well?"

"That I was blind. What d'you mean?"

She rose; she moved to the window and stood looking down into the square.

"I don't wish to enlarge—at present. You have given me very little time—my dear. You go back——"

"The day after to-morrow."

"Exactly. Sometimes—even a mother—may wish—to be remembered—and to forget—— You'll stay to dinner?"

"Of course."

"Thank you, my dear. Won't you let me forget—just for a few hours——?"

"I will, mater—but I don't understand——"

"Perhaps—some day—you will, my dear boy."

II

At tea he asked his mother what had become of Cummins, and she told him that Cummins had been dismissed for impertinence and neglect of her duties, but

she did not tell him the true reason. She sat there in black and white, with the August sunlight touching her soft fair hair, a very comely woman admirably gowned within and without. She talked about the war, and the changes that the war was producing in the manners and the mentality of the populace, but even her conversation suggested concealment. She kept life and the realities veiled like some French madame in a *pâtisserie* shop who keeps her cakes covered with muslin. Or perhaps she suggested secrets preserved in ice. But the impression that she gave to her son was one of concealment, of something smothered away, of a figure behind a curtain, of a little dagger hidden in a muff.

After tea she said that she had more letters to write, and he went out and walked. He walked round and round the square, remembering that night when he had circled it like a humiliated human beast in a cage. Old Cummins had let him in—kind old Cummins. He was sorry that she had gone. Why had she gone? Why was his mother making all this mystery about her refusal to recognize or even to consider his marriage? She seemed to be concealing something. She was so superior and serene about it, so confident in a way that made him uneasy. No doubt she objected to Kitty and to Kitty's mother, and to the tobacco shop, and to the whole atmosphere of Vernor Street; and his blindness—as she described it—his blindness to the social complications. But he was not blind to them. He loved Kitty; he was happy with Kitty; he liked Mrs. Sarah; he felt at home in Vernor Street, much more so than in Cardigan Square. Was it due to the war? Would he not feel just as much at home with Kitty after the war, if there was to be an after the war? He and Kitty would have a home of their own somewhere. And would he care very much if all his relatives and his mother's friends left him alone with Kitty? He did not think so. Besides, things were going to be different after the war; the change was in the air. Why did not his mother recognize it? It was she who was blind, wilfully blind.

But argue as he would, he could not dispel this impression of his mother as of a woman hiding behind a curtain, nor would she withdraw that curtain or suffer him to put it aside. What was it that she was concealing behind it?

Nothing but her prejudices, her understandable hostility? He could not escape from the feeling that there was something more.

What was it?

He was conscious of a desire to discover the whole of it before he went back to France.

And then he found himself at his mother's table, and it seemed so familiar and yet so strange. He saw the same silver, the same glass, the Worcester dinner-service, the Sheffield plate dishes, his own silver table napkin ring with his initials on it. And flowers, mauve and white asters, looking as though they were made of wax and had bloomed lifelessly in the vases for the last ten years. His mother's face and figure, too, had the quality of wax. She wore her black silk dress, and a rope of pearls; her skin had a waxiness, though the tip of her nose showed that slightly reddened and polished sheen that associated itself with the arctic blue of her eyes. Yes, just as though she had come in on a frosty morning. Always he had been a little afraid of his mother, afraid of those blue eyes and the high light on the tip of her nose.

It was a rather dreadful meal. Everything was so changeless and correct; everything matched and balanced. He was made to think of Vernor Street, and of the unconventional but efficient ease of Mrs. Sarah's table, where one vegetable dish had a green border and the other a blue one, and the salt-cellars were odd, and you helped yourself and got up to cut bread if you wanted it. And Mrs. Sarah eating as though she enjoyed her food, which she did. He had never heard his mother say that she liked a particular sweet or savoury. She ate rather as a wax figure might be expected to eat.

What a contrast, too, to that noisy cheeriness in France, where you drank whisky out of cheap tumblers or tin mugs, and the tablecloth might be an army blanket.

"Will you have some Sauterne, Alex? I am afraid there is no whisky."

He drank Sauterne. He was feeling abominably restless and on edge. He was conscious of his chair and of his knife and fork. He talked in snatches. And all the while he was telling himself that he must have it out with his mother before he went back to Kitty. He owed it to

Kitty. This atmosphere of a concealed crisis was intolerable.

Afterwards he followed her upstairs to the drawing-room and drank his coffee there, standing by the open window and making a tinkling sound with his coffee-spoon. The evening was superb. The tops of the plane-trees were a deep green under a sky that seemed stretched like a blue-black velarium above the tops of the houses. Even the privets and hollies and shabby lilacs in the gardens took to themselves a mystery and a softness He stood at gaze. A big star pierced the sky high up in the deepening blue. Something in him seemed to attach itself to that point of silver. Suddenly he was moved to speak.

"Mother——"

She was at her desk, still busy with some of those eternal papers of hers, though he doubted whether she could see to read them in the dusk.

"I have never said I was sorry."

Her figure gave him a sense of stillness.

"In your letter, Alex."

"Yes, in that letter. But I have never said it. Perhaps you were waiting——"

"In what way are you sorry?"

"For not telling you before I went to France. Perhaps you will forgive me."

"I have forgiven you—that," she said.

He waited. He had stood before her in the dusk like a warm-hearted child that had said, "Mother, I'm sorry." He had offered her a sudden impulsive sonship, the chance of a new relationship, a more significant intimacy. Would she accept it? Would she put aside that curtain? She was his mother. This going back to France would be different from the other going; he had experienced deeper emotions; he was more of a man. He did not want to leave wounds behind him, a misunderstanding that could not be healed.

But the silence continued, though he heard the rustling of her papers. What was she going to say? Surely she would say something? He heard her push back her chair. She rose.

"It is getting too dark to see. Please ring the bell, Alex."

He rang it.

"Jeffreys had better close the shutters and draw the curtains, so that we can have the lights."

The maid appeared, and shut out the green-grey trees, the blue-black sky, and the star.

"Smoke—if you like, Alex."

He brought out his cigarette-case, and with his face averted, lit a cigarette.

III

Kitty noticed the change in him. He came back to her that night with a troubled and silent look. She asked no questions. She gathered that his mother had given him no comfort, but she did not think that it was Mrs. St. George's merciless rigidity that had brought that look to his eyes. "Only two more nights"; his eyes said just that to her, and her heart understood.

On the last day he showed a silent gentleness, as though all that was happening in him was too complex and too poignant to be put into words. He was too deeply conscious of his feelings to be articulate; a sorrowful sadness possessed him. But he showed himself to her in flashes, little human tendernesses.

"Where do you sit, Kitty, when you write to me?"

"O, just here."

"Show me."

She got out the writing-pad and sat down at the end of the table with her back to the fireplace, and posed herself as though she were writing one of her letters to him.

"Just like this."

"I want to be able to see you. Write."

She went through the dumb-show of writing, and he stood and looked at her as though he were printing a memory, stamping it in vivid detail upon his consciousness. Her head of wavy and honey-coloured bobbed hair bent itself over the table. A left fist rested with its knuckles on the edge of the page. She held the pen between a plump forefinger and thumb. She gave the impression of great intentness, of serious concentration; he could imagine her frowning or smiling gently as she raised her head and stared steadily at a Landseer engraving on the opposite wall.

"Now—I shall always see you like that."

"It's generally—at night."

"And the light shines over your hair. I sit anywhere I can, on a box, on the edge of my bunk, or at a civilized table, if we are in billets. Sometimes there is a little bit of garden left—and you can lie on a patch of grass. It's good to be able to feel you can see people."

He was the more passive of the two. He had returned to the shadow of the world's fear; she could feel the shadow of it upon him, chill and speechless, and being active, even in her emotions, she went into the shadow with him as though her glowing head and the warmth of her steadfast little body could disperse some of the darkness. Or—at least—she would be with him in the darkness. She understood it all, those swiftly passing hours, his gentle and melancholy restlessness, the way he would keep glancing at his wrist-watch.

She made him take her out into the park, and they sat on the same seat in Queen's Walk. They had it to themselves. She sat beside him with an air of solemn wakefulness, as though she were keeping a vigil with him. He rested his elbow on his knees, and, bending, stared at the gravel, and prodded it aimlessly with his stick. He talked in snatches.

"Hope old Grimshaw will still be there."

"Why not, laddie?"

"O, things happen so quickly, you know. Grimmy's such a good chap."

She gathered that Grimshaw or "Grimmy" was a comfort to him, and she made him talk about Grimshaw, and was able to piece together a picture of her husband's particular friend. "One of those stout, cheery chaps, you know, always pink in the face—even when things are pretty bloody. He has helped me no end. It wouldn't be the same, somehow, in B Company if Grimmy weren't there. Such a heart in him." Her gratitude went out to Lieutenant Grimshaw, that stocky, fatherly youngster, with his square red face and his dark eyes. So stout in the leg was he that the set of his puttees was a bit of a problem. He had a very red mouth and very black hair, and a voice that was like his face, full of deep colour. Strong, too! Alex had seen him pick up a six-foot sergeant wounded in a narrow trench, and carry him to

where the stretcher-bearers could deal with him. And the buttons were always coming off Grimmy's tunic. Alex had seen him tied up with a boot-lace.

"He's good to be with. He's such a sport. Helps you to be a sport. It isn't easy—sometimes."

She gave him a deep, maternal look.

"But you are a sport."

"I try to be," he said, prodding hard at the gravel.

IV

He could not sleep that night. He neither wished to nor could, with that watch ticking away the heart-beats, and something unexpressed in him struggling for expression. They sat side by side in the narrow bed, leaning against each other, his right arm about her body, her left arm over his shoulder. The room was completely dark.

He talked. His voice had a hushed and intimate seriousness. It was as though he were seeing himself and describing himself to her, his temperamental unfitness, the horror of his fear, its humiliation.

He said: "It's horrible to talk like this, but yet telling you seems to help me. One has to try and do the pretending out there."

"Never pretend with me."

She put her mouth to his shoulder.

"If it helps, tell me anything. All men are afraid, aren't they? Only the fools—and you are not a fool. It's only human to be afraid."

"It's the—meanness—of it——"

She felt him grow rigid as though resisting the ghastly temptation to be mean.

"Horrible! That unaccountable fear. Makes you sly—almost. All the decent, honourable feelings you've grown up with seem to drop like water out of a burst paper bag. You're just a cunning, shivery creature ready to bolt into a hole—and leave someone else to do the dirty job. And I'm not mean, naturally; that's what shocked me so."

"Of course you're not mean, laddie. You feel things more."

"I wish I didn't. I have done things—once or twice—that made me feel sick and cold afterwards—and then hot

with shame. I have been ready to snarl at Grimmy because I thought he had picked the safest corner in a dug-out. As if he would! And once—when a strafe was on—I sent my servant—— I have sat like a paralyzed rat in a corner and left my sergeant to carry on—when I ought to have been—— O, you can't think how I hated myself, loathed myself——"

She held him fast.

"But you have stuck it, laddie. You have not gone sick. You—are—doing your job."

She felt him relax a little.

"Yes. And I'm doing it better. Though I don't like it any better. It's the meanness of fear that gets me, that makes me set my teeth, though my heart's pumping. I feel cold all over. I say to myself—'Damn you—don't be mean.'"

It was her turn to pour out whispered words. She told him that he had two enemies to face instead of one, and that she was proud of him for making such a fight of it. Yes, and for feeling as he did, and telling her about it. She said that he was showing more courage than the men who had no imagination and were less sensitive, and less generous, too, perhaps.

He kissed her mouth.

"Dear mouth—for saying such things. But you do help me out there. Most fellows are supposed to be more windy when they get married, but I am different. I'm always thinking of you. You seem to be there sometimes. It's my faith in you, Kitty. I can think of you with such confidence. You're such a dear, plucky, wholesome little woman. I feel that you couldn't do a mean, cheap thing, and it helps me to overcome that horrible meanness. It's good to be able to think like that. It's like one's belief in a God—or something that's finer and bigger than we are."

She answered with awed earnestness.

"I'll try never to fail you, laddie. I'm loving you all the time."

V

She saw him off from Victoria. The sun was shining, and he managed to smile at her, but it was a smile that made her want to catch his head in her arms.

She knew how he was feeling, but she kept her courage in her eyes. "It can't be long now. The tide has turned, laddie."

He both looked at her, and yet could not bear to look.

"I shall see you when you are writing your letters."

"I'll write to-night."

A whistle blew, and he held her for a moment.

"I think you're my religion, Kitty—I won't——"

"No, you'll not be," she said, "you'll not be."

CHAPTER XI

I

FREAM'S Hotel in Vernor Street had lost some of its distinguished shabbiness during the war. It had been an hotel with traditions, and it had held to those traditions and to its old-fashioned Regency furniture, until the death of Queen Victoria had symbolized the spreading of a gradual newness. "Fream's" had offered brass candlesticks and slippers to its county people from Sussex and Hampshire and Dorset twenty years after most hotels had forgotten that such a practice had existed. With the passing of "Vicky" all kinds of solemn fustiness, the lumber of two generations, had been bundled out into the street, though "Fream's" had retained its comfortable, solid, and county tradition. Long, lean men of the county breed and dowdy women who were somebodies, and had not to put on clothes or to take them off in order to assure the world that they were somebodies, still went in and out of its unpretentious doorway. But with the war a change had come. "Fream's" was painted and redecorated. Like some middle-aged woman suddenly infected with the war excitement, it had taken to lipstick and powder-puff, shortened its skirts, and become a little demode. The same sort of people stayed there, but they were different, and they stayed there with a difference. The hotel register had learnt to shut an eye.

"Fream's" was full of khaki. It associated itself with the war's red-faced, hard-eyed hurry to get its adventures, and to get them somehow or somewhere, but it still retained its tradition of wholesome discretion. It was not blatant in its second youth; it might be accommodating, but it prescribed limits. Nice people still went there.

So that when Mrs. Clara St. George drove to "Fream's" one day in a taxi, and intimated to the manager that she had to be provided with a room for a week, as she was giving all her servants a holiday, she ostensibly was not departing from what might have been a Melfont St. George tradition. The manager, of course, knew nothing of her motives.

"We are rather full, madam. There is a room on the second floor that will be vacant on Tuesday."

"Let me see it."

The manager took her up in person. It was a room overlooking Vernor Street, not actually opposite Mrs. Sarah's, but about twenty yards lower down. The occupant of the room was out, an officer on leave, an untidy, flashy sort of person, judging by the rare clutter, and a pair of purple and orange striped pyjamas flung anyhow upon the unmade bed. The manager apologized for the state of the room. Officers on leave were late risers.

Mrs. St. George was standing at the window, and looking diagonally across the street at the cream strip of painted brickwork that was Mrs. Sarah's. She was not paying much attention to the manager.

"The room is rather small."

"On Thursday, madam, I might be able to manage——

"O, this will do—perhaps. Is the street very noisy at night?"

"Very little traffic after eight o'clock, madam. We are off the main routes."

"You can reserve me this room from the Tuesday."

She arrived on the Tuesday, between tea and dinner, with one trunk, a suitcase and a hat-box, and she came down to dinner in a hat. She gave the head-waiter a one-pound note. "I should like that little table in the corner. I want to be quiet." Beacham had been head-waiter at "Fream's" for fifteen years, and he knew his English gentlewoman, and especially the aristocratic and sometimes eccentric gentlewoman up from her place in the country. "I think I can arrange it, madam." She appropriated the table, and sat down with her back to the room. She had a large mirror on her left, and in it she could see the whole dining-room reflected.

The chambermaid on the second floor noticed that Mrs. St. George spent a great deal of her time in her bedroom.

She rarely went out. She kept her door locked. She sat in an arm-chair by the window, with the muslin curtains drawn, her gaze directed diagonally downwards at the doorway of Mrs. Sarah's shop. She kept a notebook and a pencil in her lap. She sat there for hours, deliberately vigilant, and learning to recognize many of the men in khaki who entered that shop more than once. When she had classed a man as a habitué, she would time the length of his stay, and make a note of it.

Occasionally she saw one of the girls, and on the first occasion that she saw Kitty, her face sharpened to a vivid alertness. Her eyes resembled two points of blue light. Kitty was dressed in black, and wore a black hat with a sapphire-coloured wing in it. She came out of the shop with the air of a young woman who had some definite purpose in view, and without pausing, walked down the opposite pavement. Mrs. St. George stood up, and leaning forward, looked down at her, seeing the little sturdy figure foreshortened. She looked at Kitty, and the contours of Kitty, with the eyes of a *sage-femme*.

No, the little figure below looked virginal. She carried her shortish skirt as a young girl carries it. Mrs. St. George had a glimpse of her glowing, vivid face. No baby there, no morning squeamishness, no significant something. And four months or so had elapsed since their marriage, and Alex had hinted—rather definitely——

Mrs. St. George sat down. Yes, that baby business was a painting of the lily, middle-class sentimentality used as that class might be expected to use cheap scent. Or was it possible that the girl had taken care to be on the safe side? Or, had she felt a little uncertain four months ago, and had found Alex and an abrupt marriage doubly reassuring? Mrs. St. George saw what she wanted to see, and her answer to any questions that she asked was like the answer in a French conversation book, waiting there to be read.

For, certainly, she had her justifications. Had she put on the spectacles of an impartial observer, she would still have felt compelled to ask herself why dozens of officers entered Mrs. Sarah's shop during the day, and why a proportion of them stayed there long enough to sample half of the brands of cigarette that the shop supplied. And Mrs. St. George was not impartial. The back of her mind

was occupied by red cushions, and two pretty girls, and a fat and sniggering old woman, and a collection of loafing men who were—well—just men. It all seemed so obvious. Moreover, she had received confidential reports from Messrs. Test & Crabtree, and they had reinforced her determination to believe the very worst of No. 7 Vernor Street.

As old Test had put it, puffing out his lips and then sucking them in—"Dubious sort of establishment—very. We have had it under observation for a month or more—now. Nothing definite, sufficiently definite yet. And one has to be aware of assuming the obvious."

To Clara St. George the atmosphere of Mrs. Sarah's establishment was as obviously definite as the yellow rawness of a London fog. She could assume all that went on there behind those painted walls. High jinks! Abominable rowdiness. She was quite sure that men sneaked out of the house after dark. She had heard voices—rowdy voices—coming from an upper window; she felt convinced that they had come from Kitty's particular window.

On Mrs. St. George's third evening at "Fream's" Corah came to dine with an officer, a captain wearing the ribbon of the Military Cross, and black and white chessboard flashes. Mrs. St. George recognized the girl's reflection in the mirror, but Corah did not recognize Mrs. St. George. She was not expecting to see Alex's mother in the "Fream" dining-room, tucked away in a rather badly lit corner, and with her back turned to the room. Corah was in evening dress, a cerise-coloured frock; she was going to a dance.

Mrs. St. George enjoyed her dinner. She remained at her table until Corah Greenwood and her soldier had left.

But she had a piece of good fortune towards the end of her stay at "Fream's," if the distorting of an infantile coincidence can be called fortunate. She saw Kitty leave No. 7 Vernor Street with an officer, a stout, thick-set, red-faced young man with very black hair. They were out together fully two hours, and when they returned—the officer followed her in! He stayed an hour. The same thing happened next day, only he called for Kitty after the shop was shut. They came back as dusk was falling. Mrs. St. George did not dine that night. She saw that

thick-set, husky young man follow Kitty in through Mrs. Sarah's private doorway.

Mrs. St. George put her hat on, and going down, walked up and down Vernor Street. It was half-past ten before the man emerged from No. 7. A girl let him out. Mrs. St. George happened to be within a few yards of the door. The street was very dark.

"So-long, Kitty——"

"Good night, Grimmy."

Could anything be more obvious! The girl had lovers. Mrs. St. George returned to her hotel.

II

Lieutenant Grimshaw was unfortunately home on leave, with instructions from Alex to see Kitty and Mrs. Sarah, and to take Kitty out to a show if he cared to. Mr. Grimshaw turned up at No. 7 Vernor Street with his black hair very smooth, and wearing a new tunic, and introduced himself.

"I'm Grimmy—you know. Lots of love from Alex."

He was welcomed, especially by Kitty, who regarded this ruddy, cheerful young man as the nearest thing to Alex, a walking mirror in which she could catch a glimpse of Alex reflected. He was part of the life over there, part of Alex's life. She felt grateful to Grimshaw.

"Good of you to come, very. Mother's upstairs. You are one of the family, you know."

He looked down at Kitty with his mischievous black eyes.

"Well—I have heard a lot about you, got quite used to your photo. Feels good to see you, though."

She took him upstairs to Mrs. Sarah, who placed him in her catalogue, but on a page that was starred. He sat on the sofa beside her, and had her laughing before he had uttered ten words.

"Well, we're mopping up old Fritz. You'll have Alex back again in no time."

He was like a winter sun, round and red and glowing. His cheerfulness was not a pose; he could not help it. He was the most direct and trenchant thing in khaki that Kitty had met. He enjoyed the war, and said so.

"Great business. Better than sitting in my old pater's office down in Exeter, and trying to look solemn over a lot of dirty documents. That's what I've got to go back to."

The thing that astonished Kitty was that the round, muscular, ruddy creature understood Alex, for understand him he did. There was a sort of affectionate twinkle in his eyes when he spoke of St. George, and Kitty made him talk about her husband. They went for a ride on the top of a bus, and had tea somewhere in Hammersmith, and walked all the way back.

"Alex takes things so damned seriously."

"I know he does. Some men are made that way. He told me you helped him a lot."

"O, stuff! Alex is one of those chaps who does things on his nerves. Did he tell you about that raid—just before I came across?"

"Something about carrying a man in?"

"Yes, jolly plucky. It's the fellow who has to make himself do things—— Finest sort of pluck—I mean. I'm just a bit of beef."

"You're a dear," she said, and looked proud and a little fierce.

"O—I don't know about that. Glad you think so. Alex is all right, you know. I father him a bit."

"Go on fathering him, Grimmy. It makes me feel better. I want him to come back."

"Alex wants to come back. Don't blame him."

On the second day Lieutenant Grimshaw had supper with them, and kept them all laughing till half past ten, when he departed to his hotel. Exeter and a devoted family expected him on the morrow. He promised to come and see them again at No. 7 on his way back from leave.

"That's a good lad," said Mrs. Sarah.

He was. But someone else was colouring Grimmy Grimshaw and others to look like raw flesh, and was putting them all in a letter—a most murderous letter.

III

It was like steel, that letter, deliberately and ruthlessly tempered. As a proof of her deliberation, it may be said

that Mrs. St. George took a week to compose it, building it up sentence by sentence, polishing and improving. Dispassionately and lucidly written, and tinted with a kind of elevated affection, like the glow of sunlight upon icy peaks, it was devilishly clever. It assumed a duty, the carrying out of a devoted responsibility. It spoke as from a marble and maternal throne. "My dear boy—I am writing this for your sake." She did not accuse—she judged and condemned. She gave her son facts, or what she had every right to assume to be facts. She said: "I was determined to be sure. I set out to convince myself of the truth before I took this most serious step. I realized that I had no right to open your eyes unless I knew that I was showing you the truth. I have had the evidence of my own senses. I have not left the collecting of evidence wholly to others."

Translated from the Smythian tongue, it set out starkly just what Mrs. Sarah was, and her house, and her daughters. She did not call No. 7 Vernor Street a brothel but the word was there none the less, trailing between every sentence. Mrs. Greenwood's daughters received men; you could call them lovers, if that sort of thing was love. The girl Kitty had exploited her son's sense of chivalry. But behind his back——! Rowdiness, men coming and going, sneaking out after dark, that old mother smirking over the business. A truly horrible establishment, tainted, sly, treacherous.

Clara St. George said nothing of the letter to her lawyers. She kept it by her for some days after she had completed it. She knew the risk she was taking, that she might be provoking a violent and unsavoury row that could be translated to the law courts. These women of Vernor Street might fight.

She would let them. She thought she could produce enough evidence to tar and feather Mrs. Sarah's establishment. Her purpose was to destroy Alex's faith in his wife. A case in the courts would not tend to perpetuate a beautiful and foolish illusion, an act of war-madness.

Moreover, she had convinced herself that she was in the right, and any impartial observer looking at the affair through Clara St. George's eyes would have agreed that she was right. Life is a question of points of view. Mrs.

St. George had her own belvedere—or malvedere, if you care for a play upon words.

She posted that letter on a serene September afternoon, walking to the nearest post office with the fatal thing in her hand. She slipped it into the box with deliberate, cool fingers. She had a faint smile on her face as she walked away.

CHAPTER XII

I

Alex's man, one Private Dipper—a Cockney with a queer long crinkled nose and a receding chin, had improvised a shelter for his officer under the branches of an apple-tree that grew on a grass bank beside the road. Dipper excelled in improvisations of all sorts; he was an ingenious and busy creature, moving about on long flat feet attached to legs that were calfless. He talked with a cheerful snuffle, and kept the stump of a cigarette tucked between his left ear and his crinkly black hair that refused to be disciplined. In cold weather he was apt to develop a dewdrop at the end of his nose.

A ground sheet and some odd lengths of German telephone wire had gone to the making of the shelter, a spidery contrivance erected against possible rain. That the September sky was clear and innocent was no concern of Dipper's. He was interested in his eternal improvisations.

Lieutenant St. George sat under the apple-tree, and looked under the level sunlight at a piece of recovered France. B Company mess—a triangle of three officers—had taken its tea in the corner of a little wood of young oaks and birches a hundred yards down the road. The battalion was lying out for the night. At dawn they were to attack the village of Surenne, passing through the battalion that held the ground in front of them. Tanks were to share in the attack. It was to be a silent, stealthy, sudden affair, unpreceded by gunfire.

Dipper was showing great cheerfulness, perhaps because his officer was looking less cheerful. These stealthy affairs appealed to the Cockney's ingenious temperament. It made him think of sneaking out in plimsolls and kidding some "cop."

"Jerry don't like these catch-me-round-the-corner shows, sir. Not 'alf, 'e'll do a bunk. Windy. A few bloody machine-guns spittin' for two minutes. The rattle of our bloomin' ol' sardine-tins puts 'im rite orf it."

Probably it would be so. The war had changed. Jerry had become a somewhat slinking and surreptitious person, swearing and scratching on occasions like a mad cat, but apt to vanish over the wall. He was leaving things behind him: guns, dead, wounded, prisoners, yellow-faced French civilians, girls with no heels to their boots, white sheets floating over houses and out of the windows, mute, bewildered, shabby villages. Dipper and his like had their tails very much up, scrawling chalked notices on captured guns.

That the temper and compass of a man's courage should vary from day to day was one of those intimate and surprising discoveries that many a man made for himself during the war. The "I" in him blew hot and cold; it shivered one day and laughed the next; nor did it take its mood from the environment of the moment. Fear might come to you at night in some French village far behind the lines, and moving with cold and pattering feet upon the tiled floor, stand motionless beside your bed. It was as though courage, and the animal heat of it waxed and waned under the stress of the war, glowing and growing dim, as though some inward hand were turning the wick of a lamp. Those periods of dimness and of cold gloom were to many men hours of horror and torment. They saw themselves lying dead and stiff and sharp-faced in some trench, or perhaps they saw themselves worse than dead, disembowelled, ripped open, faceless horrible and mutilated monstrosities. And Alex St. George knew these fluctuations. He had one of these moods of indescribable and chilly gloom upon him now as he sat in the evening's light of that late September day, and looked across those empty and derelict fields.

And why?

He could say that he had missed Grimshaw, and the vivid and vital suggestiveness of the man. Grimshaw always seemed to give him something that he lacked. He had hoped to have Grimmy by him in to-morrow's show. Grimmy should have been back from leave yesterday; he had got held up somewhere on his way up, perhaps in that

awful Somme country that lay behind them over yonder where the sun was setting.

Alex's glances had a flickering restlessness. He saw things very vividly, with a sharpness that seemed to suggest a curious finality—just as you saw a landscape before rain. The captured German howitzer in the field over there, like some huge and stumpy black beast with its snout poking at the sky; a broken tree splintered in the middle with its leafy top trailing on the ground; the roofs and gables of some village rising above hedges and fruit trees, with a great white sheet still floating from the church tower, a couple of tanks covered with brushwood on the edge of a wood; two of his men sitting on a bank with their shirts off, hunting for lice. The landscape seemed to end in the sunset and a blue-grey desolation. Full of men it might be, of lorries, mules, and transport horses all toiling eastwards, and yet it seemed empty. As empty as he was feeling, for his eyes saw himself in it.

"Post ought to be up with the rations, sir."

Dipper's husky voice sounded very far away. Letters? Yes, letters. St. George had his wife's last three letters buttoned up in one of the breast-pockets of his tunic. Kitty's letters, dear, warm, human documents. As he sat there he tried to fix his consciousness on Kitty, to absorb the thought of her into himself, to be and to feel like Kitty. Almost he could pray to Kitty; he could kneel and feel those solid and protecting little arms of hers about his head. The thought of her steadied and warmed him.

For, to have great faith in someone is to have faith in one's self, and Alex had faith in Kitty. He believed in her reality. She seemed to be with him as a real presence under the most impossible and incongruous conditions, in some crowded hut in the thick of the war's most silly and exasperating and terrifying noises, under the stars in a black sky when a bombing plane boomed overhead. He hated those German bombing planes, because they reminded him that she might be in danger.

He would try to warm his soul and his courage before the glow of her reality. He would think of her fine warm body and how he had lain with her in bed, and had listened to her breathing and felt the soft movements of her bosom. He thought of her hair and her dimpled shoulders, and the way she would put her two hands over

his head. He thought of her writing those letters, sitting squarely at the table with its red cloth, the soft solidity of her, her round face giving him the impression of a glowing seriousness. He had always been in love with her seriousness, and those two very dark eyes under the straight, low forehead, and the mop of gold-brown hair. Honest eyes, steady eyes, eyes that did not lie to you. And her air of deliberation, her fearlessness! The war had made men cry out for the human shape in woman, but St. George's cry had been for more than a physical outline. He had the temperament that is called sensitive. and credulous. He wanted to idealize things. And he had idealized Kitty, the daughter of Mrs. Sarah who kept a tobacco shop in Vernor Street. And sometimes a sensitive intuition clings rightly to a belief in spite of the world's tarnished wisdom.

He clung to the consciousness of Kitty. It would help him through that detestable dawn when he would get up and go forward into the chilly greyness. Mist over the fields—perhaps, and the misty figures of your men plodding behind over sodden grass. And the sudden "clack-clack" of German machine-guns, or the infernal rending thunder of a barrage.

He pressed his clasped hands between his knees.

"I promised her and myself that I would not be mean," he thought.

Yes, he would get up and go forward into the greyness wherein would lie the village of Surenne, a little village full of fruit trees and dim white houses, He would be alone in front of his platoon, but he would not feel alone. in front of his platoon, but he would not feel alone. Even at such a moment he could be conscious of Kitty, the little woman whose arms——

Private Dipper's husky voice broke his reverie.

"Letters, sir. Two for you."

II

Private Dipper knew as much about Mr. St. George as one man can know about another when he has brought in his shaving-water and made his bed, and cleaned his boots and watched his face, day in and day out, for the

best part of four months. Dipper was a kind soul. He had his sentimental moments; he could make music on a mouth-organ and not being married and having no mother living, he would get up at "company" sing-songs and give way to husky emotion over the singing of wives and mothers. He felt protective towards his officer, and he behaved towards him as though he had lived three London lives before Mr. St. George had begun to live his one.

He knew that Mr. St. George liked to be left alone when he was reading those particular letters that came to him addressed in a round and very legible hand. His officer would have a certain look on his face "all shining-like." Private Dipper had seen Mrs. St. George's photo. He had let it be known in B Company that Mr. St. George's missis looked a "bit of all rite."

The war was simple so far as the emotions were concerned, and yet so subtle in suggesting the complex interassociation of these very emotions. Man might marvel at himself, but the very intricacies of his deeper make-up were beyond him. Private Dipper went off to try and scrounge some cigarettes, leaving his officer under the apple-tree reading his letters. When he returned some twenty minutes later, in possession of three gaspers, the figure under the apple-tree had disappeared.

The bank bounding the road was some six feet high, too high for Private Dipper to see over it. Its top cut the trunks of a dozen or so old fruit trees—pears and apples—that made up a small orchard belonging to a cottage of timber and white plaster that had been wrecked by a shell. Dipper had explored the cottage in search of a possible billet, but the shell, having exploded inside it and made it a vast disorder of torn laths and furniture and timber and plaster, Private Dipper had found the place too complicated a ruin and beyond his improvisations. He stood there, vaguely alert, lighting a cigarette. Mr. St. George might have gone for a walk, for officers did go for walks during the war, and Mr. St. George had a fondness for prowling about by himself. He was what Dipper described as "a dreamy kid."

The Cockney had taken six pulls at his cigarette when he heard a peculiar sound coming from the other side of the high grass bank. The sound was peculiar by reason of

its unexpectedness, and not because of its original quality. Private Dipper's spiky face sharpened attentively. He gave a sidelong upward glance at the grass bank.

A moment later he was on the top of it, and looking down into the orchard. His little dark eyes seemed to grow narrow under the brim of his steel hat. Blimy! He did not utter that most eloquent word, but his face expressed it.

He saw the coarse grass, the old trees with their twisted and thickened trunks and the long shadows they threw, and the brown crater of a shell-hole with clods of earth scattered about it. Mr. St. George was lying on his right side under one of the trees. He lay in the shadow, with a bar of sunlight across his legs. He looked all twisted.

Private Dipper slithered down into the orchard.

"Gawd, sir, you ain't been 'it? I 'eard no shell."

Mr. St. George raised himself on a stiff arm.

"No, Dipper; it's all right."

Dipper was staring at that patch of something on the grass.

"Was it your tea, sir? Something's disagreed with you."

"I don't know. I've been sick."

"I can see you 'ave, sir."

Also, he could see Mr. St. George's face, and it carried Dipper's thoughts back to bank holidays at Southend-on-Sea, and people going gaily for a sail, and coming back yellow and shrunken.

"'Adn't you better see the M.O., sir?"

"No, I'm all right, Dipper, now."

"You look pretty cheap, sir."

"O, I'm all right—I'll lie here for awhile. You might get me my trench-coat."

Dipper went for the coat, and returning with it and spreading it on the grass, suggested that Mr. St. George should lie on it.

"Just slip your arms into the sleeves, sir."

In helping him, he touched one of Alex St. George's hands.

"Lord love a duck, but you're cold, sir."

"Just a bit, Dipper. Being sick makes you like that. I shall be all right in five minutes. Thanks——"

"Couldn't you take a little drop of whisky? I'll run along to the mess."

"No; I'll just lie here, Dipper. Don't worry, that's a good chap."

But there are occasions when a man feels that he has a right to worry and to disobey orders, and having tucked Mr. St. George up in his trench-coat and put his haversack under his head, Dipper went down the road to where B Company mess sat upon empty ammunition boxes under a young oak tree. Captain Horner of B Company was squatting on a box, writing a letter. A little, stout man, going prematurely bald, with very round blue eyes, he stared at St. George's servant.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"What do you want?"

Horner had a natural abruptness, and the war had emphasized it. A bustling manner, a curt, snappy voice, and two staring blue eyes were part of the war reaction, natural qualities that had become over-emphasized by self-suggestion, and the habit of giving orders, and the suppression of certain indescribable physical qualms.

"Mr. St. George's been took queer, sir."

"Queer?"

Queer was a vague and unsatisfying word, and Captain Horner disliked vagueness. It wasted your time.

"What d'you mean?"

"Mr. St. George 'as been sick, sir."

"Sick!"

"'E's as cold as a bit of boiled fish. Says 'e don't want to see the M.O. Says 'e'll be all rite, sir."

"Well, what about it?"

"Thought you ought t'know, sir."

"I'll come and have a look at him—in ten minutes."

"Mr. St. George didn't want no fuss made."

Captain Horner snapped his blue eyes at Private Dipper. He wished to finish his letters, to keep his multifarious worries and responsibilities at arm's-length for five minutes.

"I'll come along."

"Right, sir."

Private Dipper saluted and departed on his flat feet.

Captain Horner continued to scribble for two minutes, but becoming more and more conscious of Second-Lieutenant Sandys, who was sitting on another ammunition box with his back against the trunk of a birch-tree. Mr. Sandy's feet were pushed out; he had very big feet. He sucked at his pipe, and watched Captain Horner's pencil. He was waiting for something to be said, and Captain Horner became more and more oppressed by his consciousness of Sandy's ironical attention. He looked across at his junior; his blue eyes had a sulky glare; he did not like Sandys; in the war it was not comforting to have near you a man who possessed one of those narrow, superior faces, a man who sneered.

"Well?" said Captain Horner's stare.

Mr. Sandys drew in his long legs.

"Pity Grimshaw hasn't turned up. To-morrow's show."

"Quite."

Horner snapped both eyes and lips. Deliberately he folded up his letter, slipped it into an envelope, fastened the flap, wrote the address and signed the envelope.

"Tell Morgan to take the mail down to H.Q.—will you?"

Sandys nodded.

"And don't be so bloody superior. See."

And rising on his stout legs, and giving his round body a sort of heave, he walked out of the wood and down the road towards the orchard and the shell-smitten cottage.

Dipper, standing in the roadway, pointed the Captain over the bank. The glance that passed between the two men contained the beginnings of a smile, a smile in which mere mirth was merged into the largeness of a tacit human understanding. "'E's only a kid," said the private's eyes, and Captain Horner went over the bank and down into the orchard where the son of Clara St. George was sitting propped against a tree. A strange vacant face raised itself and was touched by the evening sunlight. It had a flaccidity, a whiteness, and wide and gentle eyes.

"Hallo—George."

St. George made a movement as though to get up. He might have been a man who had been knocked out by a

heavy body blow, and was still feeling an emptiness and a bewilderment. Captain Horner stood over him, with his feet wide apart, staring kindly.

"Don't get up, old chap. You look rather cheap. What's the matter?"

He was aware of those wide, wavering eyes.

"Nothing, sir. I have been—a bit—sick. I'm all right now."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"You don't look it, George."

He bent down, and with a big red hand gripped St. George's wrist.

"You're cold, man."

"Am I? It's nothing. Something must have upset me. I was quite all right. Shall be all right again soon."

"You had better let the M.O. have a look at you."

"No, really,—there is nothing the matter. I shall be perfectly fit—for the show."

Captain Horner straightened his round body, and looked bothered.

"What about some dinner——?"

"I don't think I'll touch any food."

And suddenly his flaccid, empty face seemed to grow tense and frozen. Pressing an arm against the trunk of the fruit tree he raised himself up, and stood on his feet. His eyes had a fixed and anxious look, as though he was not sure of his balance.

"Quite all right, Skipper, thanks. Think I might stroll back with you and have a whisky. Might do me good."

Horner eyed him kindly.

"Right you are. Nothing like a little drink—sometimes."

St. George staggered, and then stood still for a moment at the bottom of the grass bank, and Horner was ready with an expectant hand.

"Feel a bit squeamish—still?"

"O, quite all right now."

He walked down the road to the wood, moving with a suggestion of conscious effort, a man not quite sure of his legs—or of anything.

III

Some twenty-four years ago, in the "blue room" at Melfont St. George's, a woman had given birth to a son. She had suffered perhaps more than most women suffer, but her pain had been physical, pangs of creation and of birth, while a September sun had risen steadily over the Melfont beechwoods, and played with fingers of light upon the great fish-pond in the green hollow below the house. It is said that women are more tolerant of pain than men, but the pangs of Clara St. George's labour were to be passed with a far more bitter anguish to her son. She had made alive, and in seeking to keep, she had stooped to kill. For what was it that she had wounded? What was it that bled? She had no knowledge of how he spent that night, lying stiff and still, staring straight up at the sky, while his men slept where they lay. He could not sleep. He had no wish for sleep. He lay and waited, trying to draw about his love the shades of a rent illusion. How much did he believe, and how little?

If only he could speak to her, touch, see! But this horrible helplessness! To know that you might never know the truth! To be there waiting—like a beast for the slaughter-house, an intelligent quivering creature! To have to get up and go forward in the grey of the dawn, without hope, without the warmth of an illusion, with dull dread in your feet, and eyes that were empty! O, what a hell, a woman-made hell! How much did he believe, and how little?

He kept looking at his watch, with its hour-points and hands dimly glowing. That watch had ticked away the hours beside their bed. He felt so empty. He was not conscious of fear; he felt too cold and too empty and too little alive to suffer fear. He lay like a man waiting for the end of something, the striking of a particular hour, some final and fatal act. He might never see his wife again; he might never be able—— O, this damnable and filthy doubt! Helpless——? He was as helpless as a wretch tied to a stake on the seashore, and waiting for the grey sea to rise.

Would the night never pass! He felt so cold, so cold in his stomach.

Twice he got up, and walked up and down on the grass beside the road. He heard men snoring, blissful animals, stolid souls. The night was very still and grey, full of the new strange secrecy of the war's explicit. Not a Véry light, not the sound of a gun anywhere. He almost wished that he could hear that familar clack-clack of a German machine-gun. It would mean that some live man was awake. He felt so dead.

He climbed the bank to the orchard, and wandered aimlessly about among the fruit trees. What a place, what a night, what an emptiness!

He glanced at his wrist-watch. Three o'clock. He supposed that over there in London Kitty was asleep.

His heart cried out: "Kitty, O—Kitty!"

It could not be true. He leaned against the trunk of a tree, and gripped it with his arms, tried—as it were—to clasp to him the conviction that it could not be true. If only he had had Grimmy with him, someone to whom he could talk.

Later, a kind of flaccid calmness came to him. He felt very cold and strangely inert. He was conscious of nothing but that cold ache under his ribs; he was not conscious of his limbs. Almost, it was as though he did not care, had not the heart to care.

He went and lay down again under the tree. He lay there for an hour. Presently there came a sense of stealthy movement, of dim shapes going to and fro. He heard a voice, subdued but authoritative; men stirred, coughed, muttered. The time had come; he rose with a sense of vague relief, as though something had been strangling him, a clutching hand. He had to act and to think. He heard his name called—"Mr. St. George."

Quietly he answered: "All right—I'm ready."

IV

They went forward towards the village of Surenne. He saw it against the horizontal greyness of the sky, lying at the top of a gradual and grassy slope, a few little white houses, some poplars, a queer slate-blue church spire. It

had the softness of a pastel, and so had the sky, and the grass, and the trees. The landscape looked empty and peaceful and still, and he wondered at its stillness, and at himself, and at the war, and at the day that was being born. Over there on his right four tanks were roaring, and pushing their formidable and eager snouts up the hill. He did not seem to hear the noise the creatures made, nor the dull, quick plodding of the men behind him.

Not a bullet, not a shell!

He realized with a kind of strange anger that the Germans must have decamped from Surenne. The attack was a punch delivered at the empty air. Was it that he asked for tumult, opposition, noise, the stress of violent happenings, physical anguish? But this stillness!

He was aware of voices, fragments of words and sentences—"He's done a bunk"—"Poor old Jerry"—"I could do with a hot breakfast." He swung on over the dew and grass. They came to little gardens, trees, the backs of the cottages; he went on like a sleep-walker up a narrow passage between two white plaster walls; he found himself in the village street. Emptiness, save for a tank cruising up it, its snout in the air like an alert nose.

He was standing under a house when he heard that German shell in the air. It came as certain shells came, with a personal and paralysing directness. It was his shell. He did not throw himself down as the bunch of men behind him did. One of them had a glimpse of Mr. St. George going down on his knees and covering his head with his arms.

The shell struck the roof of the house, just above him, A piece of wall, pushed out by the explosion, slanted over and fell upon the kneeling figure.

CHAPTER XIII

I

KITTY ST. GEORGE crossed Cardigan Square. She paused for a moment on the paved path that skirted the garden railings, and let a taxi pass, and in pausing, her eyes raised themselves to the windows of No. 77. She was going to No. 77. She had a letter to show to the other woman who was waiting for news from France. She stood in the shadow of a plane-tree, a little figure in black, staring steadily at those windows. Her round white chin seemed to jut out as she stood considering the case of this other woman whom the war had touched.

Yes, that was the problem. Had it touched her? Had it touched her in the way that it would have touched nine women out of ten? Had she, too, sat and stared at that black curtain of uncertainty which was twitched aside momentarily and from time to time by an unknown and official hand? Had she sat and waited and wondered, like a child shut up in the dark?

Kitty stood back against the railings. She was thinking too of the pitiful and helpless thing that was her husband, a mere bundle of live tissues, an unconscious body passed from place to place, like a drop of dew running along the complex threads of the war's web. It was coming nearer and nearer. She had heard of that inert, stunned thing from St. Omer, Le Touquet, Boulogne. It would be carried back across the sea to her, a mere body that could not move or speak, more helpless than a baby, without memory, a vacant soul. How much had the other woman been touched by the thought of it?

Her two hands grasped firmly a black and gold bag. She had two letters in that bag, one of them written to her by Grimshaw, the good Grimmy who had arrived in the village of Surenne less than an hour after Alex's

wounding. "Grimmy" had gone through his friend's pockets before Alex had been carried to the dressing-station; he had walked beside the stretcher to the dressing-station; he had talked to the M.O. in charge of it.

"I grabbed these letters out of poor old Alex's pockets. Rather a hateful idea—other people reading one's letters. I thought you ought to have them. Don't worry too much. The doctor man sounded quite hopeful. I still feel very sorry that I wasn't there when the thing happened."

Dear good "Grimmy." Of course he had not read the letters, and he did not know what he had sent to her. Three of them were letters of hers written to her husband; the fourth was the other fatal letter from the mother to her son.

Kitty grasped her bag and crossed the road towards the door of No. 77. She rang the bell, and when the door was opened by a maid, she walked in past the girl.

"Mrs. St. George is in?"

Yes, Mrs. St. George was in.

"She expects me. Shall I go straight up? The drawing-room, I suppose?"

The girl had a vacant face; she asked a perfunctory question.

"What name, please?"

"O, you need not bother. I'll go straight up."

She did not think of her act as a piercing of the other woman's defences, of a chance seized for close combat, for her mood was one of pity rather than anger. She had that abominable letter in her bag. She had been shocked by it, and by the righteous meanness of it, she had shown it to nobody. She had felt a little bigger than her normal self after the heat of her anger had passed. She was so full of the thing that had happened to Alex that somehow she found that she had no room in her for the lesser sorts of anger. Just as Alex had striven against meanness, so would she. Nor had she thought the matter out. She had obeyed a sudden courageous impulse that had urged her to go and face this woman and spread this letter before her, and to say: "I know. You have wounded me—almost beyond forgiveness. But what are you and I now? Isn't there something bigger for us to do?"

It was an act of courage. She opened the door, and saw the other woman seated at her desk in the right-hand win-

dow. The sunlight touched her soft hair, and made a halo of it, and beyond her the autumn trees of the square floated gold, green and still. Kitty saw a pointed chin turned. A voice said sharply: "What is it, Parker?"

Kitty closed the door.

"I have come to show you a letter."

She walked forward and sat down in a little, low armchair, with her handbag in her lap, and as she sat down Mrs. St. George stood up. She showed no astonishment. She remained looking down at Kitty as she might have looked at a governess who had come to be interviewed.

"Mrs. Greenwood's daughter——? Of course."

Kitty pulled off her gloves. She was deliberate. She opened her black and gold bag, drew out a letter, and held it out to Alex's mother. And she watched Mrs St George's eyes.

Mrs. St. George did not move.

"Is it necessary? I mean——?"

Her eyes were on the letter. She drew back a little, and very slowly—with almost conscious slowness—sat down.

"I thought you would like to read it. It was written by a fellow-officer of Alex's—to me."

They sat regarding each other for a moment, but they seemed to look at each other through a sheet of glass. Something that was transparent but inpenetrable separated them. Almost it might be said that they watched each other like a couple of women with a window between them.

"From a brother officer of my son's?"

"Mr. Grimshaw. Will you read it?"

She watched Mrs. St. George's eyes, and seeing them brightly blue yet veiled with many suspicions, she withdrew the letter, and returned it to her bag.

"I thought you might like to read it. Mr. Grimshaw took all Alex's letters and posted them to me."

She drew another letter from her bag, and let it lie on her lap.

"There was this one."

Mrs. St. George sat very still. The sunlight struck beams of light from an antique rose diamond ring that she was wearing. There were little glints of the same light in her eyes. She remained poised like a figure in a

tableau vivant. Kitty saw her through glass, a woman shut up in a cabinet, cold and watchful and still.

Kitty unfolded the letter.

"You see? It came back to me. He must have read it just before he went into action. He had it in his pocket —when that shell—— It must have been very horrible for him—because——"

She paused. She was at white heat now, and her eyes never left the mother's face. What would this woman say, this woman sealed up in glass?

She saw Mrs. St. George's lips move.

"May I ask why you have come here?"

She did not look at Kitty, but straight over Kitty's head. She did not see the quality of that firm, round face or gauge its glowing solidity, or how the dark eyes grew more round and deep and inexorable.

"Because—I—mattered to your son. Because this letter is not true. Because——"

Still looking over Kitty's head Mrs. St. George rose and went towards the window. She made no sound as she moved with that gliding walk of hers. She stood looking down into the square where yellow leaves were beginning to colour the grass.

"Perhaps you will excuse me—but I think we shall never agree——"

She pushed back her hair from forehead with a gesture as of smoothing something out.

"How can we agree? If you wish me to be frank. Perhaps—too—it would be better."

"As in this letter?"

"Exactly. I was well advised. I cannot withdraw anything, for I believe that there is nothing to withdraw."

"You mean—that you believe—all that you wrote about me?"

II

Kitty sat squarely in her chair, clutching her black and gold bag, and looking like a little firm-faced and determined Madonna. She had become conscious of the room's oppressiveness, of its large and luxurious and stuffy hostility, as of the heavy hand being placed upon

her mouth. There were a hundred things she wanted to say, indignant and generous and passionate things, but they struggled together within her in inarticulate confusion. She felt sealed up in this airless room, with a woman who stood at a closed window and with an air of detached attention watched the autumn leaves falling.

What manner of woman was this, so smooth, so cold, so invulnerable? Had you screamed at her, she would have turned to look at you with impassive intelligence and an air of making allowances for a little common creature who did not know how to behave. And there was a part of Kitty that wanted to scream, to make a human and understandable noise. She wanted to break the glass case of this woman's stiffling composure, to push her fists through the window.

But she held herself in; it would not do to let go, and she knew it. She clutched her bag. She said:

"I'm sorry, but what you wrote is not true. I did not come here to make a scene. I have been trying to believe that you did not want to think that what you wrote was true. That would make things so hopeless for both of us, wouldn't it?"

Mrs. St. George did not move.

"You asked me why I came here. I came because I'm not the sort of woman you think I am, because I am thinking all the time of Alex, and of what I am to him, and what he is to me. Because—I am something to him."

She paused, her eyes looking very black in the firm pallor of her face. It was as though she had thrown a stone at a window, and was waiting to see whether the the glass would crack, or the window be thrown open by some hand of live indignation. Mrs. St. George made no sign.

"I thought that after what had happened you might meet me. It did not seem possible that you could repeat these lies, the abominable things that you said about my mother. I'm thinking of Alex; I'm thinking of him as he is now. You must be thinking, too——"

Her ungloved hand twisted the velvet bag.

"You must be thinking. You know—how—he is com ing back to us. Does it make no difference?"

Mrs. St. George turned sharply and looked at her

"Surely it does—— But not ——"

"How then——"

"To his mother——"

Kitty's eyes widened. She had the look of a live creature smothering beneath words, inarticulate, voiceless utterances.

"I was ready to tear up that letter."

She stood up suddenly. She crossed to Mrs. St. George's desk and laid her bag and gloves on it. She stood a moment staring at the papers on the desk. Then her fingers felt for the letter that she had put back into the bag.

She said: "You have written those vile things to him about me. You say you still believe them. You do not love Alex as I love him. If you did, you would know how impossible it would have been for me to be what you think."

She turned to gaze and stood waiting, but Alex's mother, with a long pale hand laid along one cheek, seemed lost in a veiled and considering silence. She was still the woman in her case of glass, flawless and untouchable.

"Is that—really—why you came here?"

She spoke softly—as to the glass of the window—or to the space of the sky beyond it.

"I cannot believe that. I agree that the situation has changed. To be frank—my son is not—what—he was."

Kitty faced her; her little body seemed to enlarge itself, and to grow more square and solid.

"You can say that to me? Well, will you look, please?"

She tore the folded letter across, placed the halves together and tore them across, deliberately and with a kind of leisurely but firm gentleness. She threw the pieces into the waste-paper basket beside the desk.

"You won't believe me even now—I suppose—when I have torn up what you wrote to him and given you back the pieces. I was ready—— But that's all. I shall not ask you again."

She picked up her bag and gloves, and went out of the room and down the stairs, and let herself out into the square. She closed the door gently. Mrs. St. George, still standing at the window, saw the little figure cross the square and disappear behind the iron railings and the smutty lilacs and privet hedges.

She remained there for awhile with her hand to her

cheek. Her eyes seemed absorbed in contemplating some inward scheme, a picture of herself and her son, a picture from which the face of her son's wife was blotted out.

III

Mrs. Sarah had been to Highbury, and Highbury was to Mrs. Sarah what the trees and the green spaces of the Villa Borghese are to Rome. Yes, in spite of motor-buses, and the fading glories of Upper Street, and the increasing noise and a spreading mouldy shabbiness. Mrs. Sarah had been born in Highbury; she had been married from Highbury, and when Mrs. Sarah went to Highbury, it was to see Jenny, and to leave some question to be answered by Jenny's husband, who was managing clerk to a firm of solicitors in Austin Friars.

Jenny Parsons was a stout body, like her sister, but brown where Mrs Sarah was black, and less active on her legs. She had the same rather flattened and humorous nose, but she had not been able to live up to her nose, or down to it, as Mrs. Sarah had. She had a few airs and graces and a good many Victorian reticences. She liked lace curtains at her windows, and would have preferred to wear a veil.

Mrs. Jenny could not refer to herself or to her nose as Mrs. Sarah referred to them.

"I got it in Upper Street, my dear, poking my face against the shop windows. They were shops in those days. Do you remember that little toy shop near the station? Gone now—of course."

Mrs. Sarah loved Highbury and the Fields, and Upper Street, and the respectable dinginess of the Grove, and the Old Dickens's houses, and Canonbury Tower. Her love could include even the Holloway Road. She went to Highbury and to Jenny when she wanted a gossip, or was feeling bothered, or had some speculative inspiration to be passed on to Bob Parsons for his consideration. Bob Parsons was also her tipster. He was one of those dry, long men with acute noses who seem capable of detecting the smell of the sea before the Yarmouth train has reached Suffolk. Mrs. Sarah liked to spread herself

on Jenny's sofa, and to loosen herself generally, and to air her varied British views, to be a Londoner of the Londoners, a woman whose secret inclination would have led her to shop in St. Paul's Churchyard.

"Get money. Go on getting money. It's like putting on weight, my dear, at a certain time of life, pleasant and comfortable. When people say some things about money, don't you believe them. Blessed are the poor. But are they? Let's be honest."

On this October day, Mrs. Sarah had been to Highbury to talk of Kitty and Kitty's affairs, and the problem of a woman who had a steel rod in her back instead of a spine, and of a poor lad smashed up in France. She poured out herself to Jenny, and the pourings were ample and rich, a Roman fountain splashing wine instead of water. She had a good many things to say about Kitty. There was that in Mrs. Sarah that recognized the makings of a great woman in Kitty.

"One blessed thing, my dear, no baby's expected."

Jenny agreed that this was a blessing.

"For as far as I can see, Kitty will have a grown-up baby to nurse. Poor lad. But she'll do it. She hasn't said so, but she'll do it. We Greenwood women—Jenny—don't let our men down. But how long is it going to last?"

Mrs. Parsons breathed heavily.

"You don't know?"

"Not yet."

"What a tax—and a young girl. I have always said—Sarah—and I always do say—that good health is half marriage——"

"So it is. But if Kitty has to shoulder the other half——."

"She's a determined little thing."

"Determined! You should have seen her—at the age of six—when Corah tried to play with her doll."

So, Mrs. Sarah kissed her sister, and trudged off down Highbury Grove in an atmosphere of autumnal wetness and dead leaves, and caught a bus by Highbury station. She was not worrying; she was not of the worrying sort; she got into the bus of life and sat down and felt solid and sure of herself. Hence her plumpness, and that merry eye that found time to look at the world and twinkle. She

believed in all the things that Mr. Bernard Shaw loves to scoff at, but had he blown ever so hard he would not have shifted Mrs. Sarah. She was a solid woman and no feather.

Vernor Street was full of the dusk when Mrs. Sarah reached it, that vapourish London dusk, hazing the lights and hiding the tops of the high houses. Also, it seemed full of whisperings and rumours, of a people's elation, of a sky that was clearing. Wonderful things were happening out yonder, but Mrs. Sarah was not thinking of the end of the war; she was thinking of her daughter married to a paralysed boy of five-and-twenty, and of what there would be for supper.

Corah was in the shop, and Mrs. Sarah went upstairs and into the room where Kitty was sitting at the table where she was accustomed to sit when she wrote her letters. Her elbows were on the table, her two fists under chin. She sat in the gathering dusk, facing it and the future, and all the sudden problems that the future had erected in front of her stubborn little chin. A helpless husband, how helpless she did not know. But more than that, for when a woman like Mrs. St. George could persuade herself to write such a letter, a letter so abominable, and so responsibly clever——

Kitty looked at her mother. Each face was dim to the other, but between these two women there was an extraordinary sympathy. To Kitty her mother was real; she brought reality and liveness into that unlit room.

Mrs. Sarah made no obvious remarks upon the absence of light. If Kitty chose to sit like that in the darkness she must have a very good reason for it. Mrs. Sarah just sat down in her favourite chair, took off her hat, and leaning forward, laid it on the table.

Kitty's fists remained under her chin; she sat and stared. She said: "I've been to Cardigan Square."

Mrs. Sarah's silence was like a bosom.

"I'll tell you why I went. I had not told you. I thought there might be no need. It's like this."

She paused.

"I would never have believed that there could be such a woman. You see—she wrote a letter about me—about us—to Alex. It must have reached him just before he was

wounded. Grimmy found it in Alex's pocket, and sent it back to me."

Mrs. Sarah was sitting very still, but her stillness was a very live stillness.

"A letter, poppet——"

"I took it back to her and tore it up. I thought—— O—well—she's a bad one."

"Tell me—just what was in that letter."

And Kitty told her.

It was then that Mrs. Sarah let out a wholesome and human—"Damn." Her stillness vanished.

"What! She wrote that of you——! Give me my hat, my dear, I'm going out."

She was a heavy woman and slow in rising, and before she could gain her feet, Kitty was upon her with arms and head.

"O—mumsie, no—it's no good. I know. I—I want to say my prayers."

She was on her knees, her bosom on Mrs. Sarah's knees, her face looking up.

"Hold my head, mumsie. I want to think. I have been thinking so hard, and things won't come right—somehow. O, that's good."

Mrs. Sarah was trembling just a little. She was a woman with large passions, not like that other woman. She pressed the girl's head between her hands.

"Let it out, poppet. I'm here. I'm a solid person."

Kitty grasped her mother's wrists.

"Mumsie, I've wanted to scream."

How long they remained like that neither of them knew, but no one disturbed them, and the room grew darker, and the life of Vernor Street made a murmuring outside the window. And presently they were speaking to each other not as mother and daughter, but as two women who whisper together of intimate dear things. Kitty's elbows were on her mother's knees.

"I have got to get him back, mumsie. He belongs to me. He can't have believed—— And I don't care what he is, he's mine; he counted on me."

Mrs. Sarah kissed Kitty's hair.

"We Greenwood women don't let our men down. As for that——"

But she did not say what she thought of Mrs. St.

George. She said things that were more helpful—practical human, sensible things.

"We'll have him here—of course. That's obvious. When the doctors will let him come. Poor lad. I don't suppose it is as bad as we think. Take life as it comes, my dear, day in—day out. Things have a way of getting themselves sorted."

Kitty's strong little arms went suddenly round Mrs. Sarah's neck.

"Mother—you're the dearest—that ever was. You're so live—— You——"

Mrs. Sarah's solidity seemed faintly to quiver.

"I'm not a tin goddess, my dear; I'm human. And that's that."

IV

Meanwhile, at Cardigan Square, Mrs. St. George, all in black and wearing her pearls, was waiting at her desk, holding a telephone receiver. She sat very still, but her stillness was that of a coiled spring.

She was trying to place herself in touch with a certain important person, just before his dinner-hour. Doctors and persons of importance can be trapped at such an hour, though there are people who delay the capture until the animal in man is fed. Mrs. St. George did not do that. Food made no difference to her beyond adding slightly to the high light upon the tip of her nose.

She caught her fish, deflecting him towards her voice, and she could make it a persuasive voice when she chose, the voice of a sweet woman.

"O, is that Sir Malcolm——? Yes, yes, this is Mrs. St. George. It seems such a shame to trouble you. But I'm so worried. You will let me know, won't you?—directly my boy reaches England—and where he is."

A clear kind voice was heard to say that he—Sir Malcolm Strode—had given special instructions in the matter, and something sinuous and eager showed itself in Mrs. St. George's attitude as she listened. She unbent to that kind and important voice; her rigid spine became flexible.

"Thank you so much. How kind you are! It means

so much. I want to see my boy—at once—— You are trying to have him sent to Poynter's Hill? O, how considerate. O—Sir Malcolm, just one moment—I suppose in a week or two I can have him here? What? Supposed to be in hospital? Yes—I know. Red tape. But the war is going to be over, and he can have every attention here. You think it could be arranged? Yes. If he is quite unfit and likely to be so—for some time—— Resign his commission—after he has been wounded? You think it might be arranged? Yes, yes. I'm so grateful. Forgive me for bothering you. Yes—good-bye."

CHAPTER XIV

I

Mrs. St. George had influence. She knew people who knew other people who had only to say a few words or write a chit, and doors were conveniently opened. For regulations are fences erected to control the mass of unimportant citizens, who are passed in and out like cattle, good, orderly cattle. Mrs. St. George had the right to the private door; she had inherited that right, though somewhere back in the past her men had earned it for her. Hence she had news of Alex's a full two days before Kitty heard of her husband's arrival in England.

Mrs. St. George borrowed a friend's car and drove to Poynter's Hill. She sat very erect, with a calmness of confident haste. She saw the red building, hideous and hard, detach itself from a group of autumnal trees, though other eyes might have fancied that the trees apologized and stood aside. "We hid it as long as possible from you. Here—it is." But a mother hurrying to see her stricken son, and to prepare the way for the possessing of him, needs no apologies for the landscape.

Her way was made easy. She was led along corridors, great white tubes of hygiene and cleanliness. In a ward that contained four beds, and four red screens neatly balancing each other, she found her son.

She had not prepared herself for what she might see, for she had no imagination. That she was shocked, as deeply shocked as it was possible for her to be, goes without saying, but her emotions were like the clashing of ice in a floe. That was her misfortune.

She sat down beside the iron bedstead, and reached for one of the hands that lay on the red coverlet.

"My dear boy——"

He stared at her, and the quality of his stare caused her to experience a slight and icy shudder. His wide eyes were absolutely empty. They did not recognize her, but what was more terrible than the lack of recognition was their utter emptiness. There was not even a glimmer of curiosity in them. They saw and did not seem to see.

"Alex, my dear, don't you know me?"

She bent over him, and all that happened was that her head seemed to throw a slight shadow across his face. She drew back. She was supremely shocked. She did not know what to do, or say, or think. She was conscious of a cold indignation, but indignation against what! Her emotion—such as it was—could help neither her nor him, though had she sat and wept and patted that inanimate hand, she might have helped herself. And suddenly she grew rigid. She sat and stared at her son's eyes and was aware of them staring back at her unblinkingly. She struggled with the sheer clumsiness, the almost absurd incongruity of the situation. She felt baffled.

It was this sense of bafflement that caused her to react as she did. Suddenly she knew herself to be in a white rage, seething with a passion to possess, to seize and carry off this inanimate thing. He belonged to her; he had belonged to her for twenty-four years. She was not a woman who had ever clutched her baby, but in some strange way she was urged to clutch her son. She thought but vaguely of Kitty for the moment. She was just a cold woman, an egoist, a flame with the glow of the Northern Lights.

She became aware of people standing behind her, a doctor and a nurse. They had stood waiting with a sort of kind detachment. She turned in her chair and looked at the doctor's face. It was round and pink, a downy face, carrying a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

She knew somehow and at once that this man was afflicted with a florid desire to please. He looked solemn and responsible and kind, and was facile. She said in a dry and self-controlled voice—

"This is very terrible."

The doctor blinked sympathetically.

"Does he understand——? Nothing?"

"I am afraid—nothing, at present."

"But will he——?"

She saw the round face grow vaguely pink under her gaze.

"O, I think so. I have seen quite a number of cases. Complete apathy, loss of memory, some paralysis."

"But not permanent?"

"No, or not wholly so. One has to be—a little—guarded."

"Exactly."

She turned again and looked at her son. The rage to possess was becoming formative and articulate. She looked at him consciously and purposefully as hers.

"You cannot say how long——?"

"Sometimes—the change is quite sudden. Just like switching on a light."

"I see," she said, and mused a moment, aware of the fact that those two eyes had closed, and that the face of her son had an extraordinary passivity.

The nurse went round to the other side of the bed and smoothed a sheet.

"It would not hurt him to be moved—I suppose?"

The round, bland forehead wrinkled itself slightly.

"Moved? But you see—this is a special hospital, and officers——"

"I know. I am not asking about your regulations."

"O, quite possible—I think. If expert nursing——"

"Thank you. I wondered. Of course—I do not intend——"

"No."

"He would be much better here—naturally, until—— I quite understand. I am sure you are all very kind."

She kissed her son on the forehead, and he did not open his eyes. She re-entered her car and was driven away from the red hideousness of Poynter's Hill, her thoughts full of an orderly haste, blown steadily across her consciousness like clouds moved by a north wind. She knew now exactly what she had to do; she had her pots and pans ready to her hand; she was a good organizer. And she wasted no time. She set about putting her plan into action with the bleak white haste of a blizzard. She did not drive direct to Cardigan Square. She stopped the car at the end of Westminster Bridge and directed the

chauffeur to drive her to the particular hotel where Sir Malcolm Strode served his country. She clove her way to the holy of holies. She was urgent and coldly passionate. She talked Sir Malcolm over. He reacted to her maternal suggestion that he should persuade other people to arrange things for her. He was tired and busy, and she was asking him to do for her what was human and reasonable.

Drinking her tea before the drawing-room fire, she considered the multifarious details of her plan, and jotted them down in a notebook. She paraded before her mind the person and temperament of the family physican, one —Dr. Dazely—who lived in Wigmore Street, a bland man with a round head, who was very particular about his clothes, and whose wife had social ambitions. Mrs. St. George needed a bland man, a man who could be persuaded to accept her rulings, and who had soft and well-soaped hands. She thought that Dr. Dazely was just the man for her. She rang him up after tea and asked him to dine with her. She told him that she wanted all his advice and support and co-operation.

He came. He was a large man with two rather ambiguous brown eyes tucked deeply into a plump and pallid face. He was a little over-tailored, and his manners were like his clothes. He was too impressively polite. He gave the impression that he always wore patent-leather boots and wash-leather gloves, because the feet and the hands of his immediate ancestors had been of common clay. His speech was flowing, a bouquet, for he could not forget that his grandfather had kept a fish shop somewhere in the Midlands.

Mrs. St. George gave him half a bottle of the best Burgundy, and two glasses of old port. She knew her man. She apologized for not asking Mrs. Dazely, but hoped that both the doctor and his wife would dine with her next week. She told Dr. Dazely just as much as she thought it was good for him to know. She painted a picture.

She wanted him to take charge of her son's case. She wanted his advice as to the conversion of her drawing-room into a nursing-room, or rather a nursery, for her paralyzed son. She wanted the best and most reliable male nurse in London.

Dr. Dazely looked politely blank over the procuring of a male nurse.

"Dear lady—but they are not to be had. Almost impossible—just at present."

"It cannot be impossible. You can get me one."

"I'll ring up the agencies and the institutes I go to."

"I want a particular kind of man, patient but strong-minded. I do not mind what I pay."

Her energy blew like a north wind, and for the next two or three days it continued in that quarter. She had her drawing-room pulled to pieces and transformed into a bedroom, transferring herself and her desk and her papers to a room that overlooked the garden. She had new patent locks fitted to the street and area doors, and one to the room that was to be a grown man's nursery. Once a day she rang up Sir Malcolm Strode. She made inquiries about motor ambulances. She sent Dr. Dazely down to Poynter's Hill to see her son and the medical officer in charge of the case, cautioning him to say nothing about Alex's probable removal.

Energized by her, Dr. Dazely produced from somewhere one Leaper—a male nurse. He came to be interviewed by Mrs. St. George at ten o'clock on a November morning. He had a square, pale face above a square body, a baldish head, two accommodating pale blue eyes, and a lower jaw that—opening and closing as on a hinge—worked like a trap. His voice was husky. He had much assurance, but could temper it, and control a rather impertinent loquacity. He called Mrs. St. George "Madam" on every possible occasion.

Mrs. St. George observed his boots, his collar and his tie. He wore that knobby sort of boot that associates itself with tender feet, but his boots were well polished. In spite of his dubious, pale eyes, his references were excellent.

He told Mrs. St. George that he had specialized in the nursing of mental cases.

Reading both the references and the man, she said that this would be a case of unusual responsibility. It might include more than nursing. It might demand the keeping at arm's length of undesirable persons and influences.

Mr. Leaper understood her at once. His pale blue eyes were full of intelligence.

"I have had experience, madam. I have had to protect some of my gentlemen. You can rely on my discretion." She did not push the matter any further, but she did state that efficient service would receive substantial recognition. She called it a gratuity; she named a figure. And she saw something more in the pale blue eyes like a snaky thing uncoiling itself behind glass. She struck at the thing at once, not to kill, but to contain it in a proper service.

"I shall expect you to show every kindness to my son. It will be a very sad and difficult life—for him."

Mr. Leaper made a little bowing movement in his chair. He had a smile that came and went as though pulled with a string, and when he smiled his square fat face seemed to perspire.

"I'm naturally kind, madam. One is of no use—in my profession—without it."

II

When Kitty came to Poynter's Hill and was shown that figure screened off in the corner of the brown and white ward, she stood for a moment with her eyes looking down at her husband, seeing all that Mrs. St. George had seen, and more, and seeing it differently. She had a moment of caring as she had never cared before. There was that in her which went out to him, and hovered, wondering at itself, and losing itself in poignant wonder. She was conscious of the two persons in herself. The nurse had warned her, but how can emotion be warned off, or the shock of seeing things as they are?

She sat down. She spoke to him.

"Alex dear, it's Kitty."

His ears were as fast closed to her voice as his eyes were to her face. Even while uttering those words she had been somehow aware of their pathetic futility. He did not understand, could not understand. There was an immense silence, uncrossable space between them. His eyes just stared.

She felt appalled. She was aware of a sense of horror,

not of him, but of his helplessness and of all that it might mean. She saw to-day, to-morrow and the next day, and that vacant face and those flaccid motionless hands. She was afraid, but with such a passion of warm fear that she was able to rise above it. Her heart rushed to the rescue. All her sturdiness seemed to stiffen with a new obstinacy.

She drew her chair close to the bed and sat holding one of his hands. She observed him with a kind of tender and intimate calmness, a sacred compassion. She felt herself being wedded a second time to something that was helpless and pitiful. She saw him somehow as her business in life, her job, her justification. If she thought of all the sacrifices, the difficulties, the baulkings, the wearinesses, that might lie before her in the future, she thought of them with that strange consecrated courage of which some women—and especially little women—are capable.

She did not speak another word. She sat holding his inert hand and holding it hard. She was no more than a gentle and determined presence.

But she talked to herself. She said things to herself that would be repeated to no living creature. She was alone with a helpless child. And before she left, she did get something from that vacant face, a little flickering smile, not of recognition, but of vague pleasure, the kind of smile an infant gives when its new senses are pleased by a bright object or a soft sound. It went to her heart. It made her conception real. It made her feel as a young mother feels.

She bent down and kissed him.

III

Afterwards she talked to the man with the gold spectacles. He was guarded and worded. He tried to be as comforting as professional caution would allow him to be. He was very cautious. "It is what we call a stupor. Last? Well, I hope not; often there is a sudden clearing of the mind."

She asked him what the afterwards might be, and he looked a little bothered, like a wise owl in broad daylight.

"O, he may be quite normal. Mentally. Yes. But we cannot be sure. One does not like to make promises. At present—I suspect—a possible paraplegia."

He had to explain the word to her. It meant paralysis of the legs.

"He will not be able to walk?"

"O, we don't know yet. It depends on organic changes, how much injury there has been to the spinal cord. We shall be more sure of that later."

He did not say anything to Kitty of Mrs. St. George's visit, or of his interview with Dr. Dazely, and she went back to Vernor Street steady-eyed, and clasping the helpless body of her love. She was full of courage.

IV

Mrs. Sarah often asked herself in after-years what might have happened if Kitty had not gone down with influenza on the day after her visit to Poynter's Hill. It was the influenza of 1918, sudden, prostrating, venomous, and for two days at least Kitty was almost beyond worrying about anything. She lay in confusion and the dullness of high fever, and Mrs. Sarah nursed her, for no other nurse was to be had,

Yet Kitty could blurt out—"Have you been?" And Mrs. Sarah had to go to Poynter's Hill and look at Alex, and be looked at vacantly by him, and feel more bothered than she had ever felt in her life before. Heavens! but what was Kitty going to make of that poor, brainless, paralyzed thing? What a marriage! What a problem!

On the fourth day Kitty threw off the fever. She seemed to fling it out of the bed with a pair of wilful hands. She insisted on sitting up, with two round black eyes in a face of chalk. She was indignant. It was no time to be ill.

Mrs. Sarah was packed off again to Poynter's Hill, and discovered blankness. Mr. St. George had been moved. Yes, yesterday, by ambulance to his mother's house. But, surely, his wife had been notified?

Mrs. Sarah said things to herself, and also to the matron.

"It's a plot. What right had she to have him moved?"

But it was a very disturbed and angry Mrs. Sarah who returned to Vernor Street, and to Kitty. She found herself repeating the same refrain. "She's got him. Damn her, she's got him!" And what was she going to say to Kitty?

She felt very hot and tired. She sat down on the red settee in the divan and told Corah to shut up the shop.

"And get me a glass of port, my dear, and a biscuit."

Corah looked a little anxiously at her mother.

"You have caught Kitty's 'flu."

"Not a bit of it, my dear. I'm tired, and in a hell of a temper. That woman has walked off with Alex, carried him off like a mouse. Damn her! She's used some back-door key."

"Taken him away from the hospital?"

"Just that. She's in possession. She's got the goods, and is sitting on them. Damned clever of her. But what the hell am I to say to Kitty?"

She took off her hat and fanned herself.

"Come. I mustn't use this language. At my age——! Get me that glass of port, poppet, there's a dear."

When she had attained to a sufficient state of coolness, mental and physical, Mrs. Sarah talked it over with Corah, who had a more impartial head than either her mother or her sister. It seemed to Corah that it was a question for the lawyers to deal with. Mrs. St. George had succeeded in impounding a son; you could not very well enter a house by force and carry off a helpless and paralyzed man, and if you did—what were you to do with him? Obviously, Mrs. St. George was no fool. The woman who happened to be in possession of Alex was the woman in power.

Mrs. Sarah, still looking very angry, had to agree.

"I shall go up and see Bob Parsons. Kitty has her rights as a wife. But I shan't tell her just yet."

So, for two days, Mrs. Sarah and Corah dissembled, and Mrs. Sarah went to Highbury, and staying to dinner, laid the case before Mr. Robert Parsons, who considered it over the bowl of his pipe.

He said it was an awkward business. He would like to take an opinion.

"Take the best opinion in London, Bob. I'll pay."

At last she told Kitty, a Kitty who was sitting up in

bed in a jade-green jacket, looking thin and white, "Just like a determined little saint in a glass window"—as Mrs. Sarah put it.

"Alex has been moved, poppet."

And to Kitty came one of those instant revelations. She seemed to know what was in her mother's mind.

"She's got him?"

"Yes, my dear. I'm afraid she has."

CHAPTER XV

I

Of many things—sentimental and otherwise—that happened after Clara St. George's recovery of her son, Vernor Street had not and could not have complete knowledge. Kitty's head went back to her pillow for seven more days, and during her relapse, Mrs. Sarah—who pitied both the victims of this marriage—opposed herself to Mrs. St. George, who pitied neither. But she was met by a woman as determined as herself, and one who had organized all the advantages of position and prestige, and who stood on the battlements of her strong tower and challenged interference. Mrs. Sarah might ring the bell of No. 77 Cardigan Square. A little brass grill had been let into the front door through which visitors could be inspected, and Mr. David Leaper—having assumed the duties of confidential man-servant as well as those of male nurse, and having been sent to inspect and familiarize himself with the persons of Kitty and her mother—had repulsed Mrs. Sarah from behind a locked door with those apocryphal words—"Not at home."

That little brass grill sobered Mrs. Sarah. It symbolized the other woman's seriousness. It made Mrs. Sarah feel that somehow she was back in the Middle Ages when young girls were shut away behind high walls. It was ridiculous and it was appalling. She let herself go to sister Jenny.

"Think of it, my dear! A woman fitting a thing like that to her front door! In these days, too, when you can get into a taxi and go and get married all in ten minutes. But it shows how little we have changed. There are

plenty of women who would be Bloody Marys if there were no Bow Street."

Baffled and barred out, and unable to come to personal grips with the woman in possession, Mrs. Sarah had to fall back upon Mr. Robert Parsons and the Law. She too had a dignity of her own, and a proper sense of it.

"I'm blessed if I am going to stand on her doorstep."

She wrote a letter to Mrs. St. George and sent it by registered post. It was a letter of common sense and of some dignity. She received no reply.

She sat down and wrote a second letter. She said:

"Are we going to settle this matter like reasonable women, or is it to be a question for the lawyers? I have as much right to think of my daughter as you have to think of your son. Heaven knows this marriage looks like being a rather tragic business without our making a Montague and Capulet affair of it."

This time she received a reply.

"Mrs. St. George begs to inform Mrs. Greenwood that her lawyers are Messrs. Test & Crabtree of Lincoln's Inn."

When she had received this letter and looked at Kitty who was sitting up in bed with an air of white determination, Mrs. Sarah went to Highbury. She sat in a tapestry chair, with her feet on a white hearthrug, in front of a comfortable fire, and talked to her sister. Later she was to talk to brother Bob.

"Of all the preposterous situations! And yet—it is pretty pitiful, my dear—for both these young things. If I didn't feel the pity of it I should feel inclined to say to Kitty—'Cut your losses and clear out. This marriage is bad business.'"

Mrs. Jenny was conventional, but gently so.

"Marriage is marriage."

"It is, and it isn't, my dear. But in Kitty's case—it's the one big business. We Greenwoods don't like to be beaten. I have a feeling that she will go right through with it, to the end—bitter or not bitter. Though what is she going to get out of it?"

Mrs. Jenny supposed that Kitty might yet get everything out of it. Women did—somehow.

Mrs. Sarah looked grim.

"That's what the men like to say. Sweet, devoted womanhood! But, confound it!—we are such mixtures. You wouldn't say—would you?—that there was a little of the man in Kitty, and yet there is. She is one of those who wants her job, and will have it—before God and the devil. Well, what time do you expect Bob back?"

"You'll hear his key in the lock at six. There never was a man of more regular habits."

"In spite of the war—and Armistice night!"

"We sat in front of the fire on Armistice night."

"Did you, now. Well, I don't know that you weren't wiser than the people who went to Piccadilly Circus."

Mr. Robert Parsons returned at six. He was a dry, dusty-coloured man with a stoop; his eyes seemed lost under languid eyelids. Strangers frequently made the mistake of thinking that they had a slow and easy man to deal with in Mr. Parsons; in the face of aggression he would appear to droop, but at the proper moment his eyes would open; he would uncurl himself; his long blunt nose would appear to enlarge. In the early stages he would allow the other people to do the talking. No, Mr. Parsons was a very sound man. He knew how to make the most of his cards.

After supper, sitting deep in a comfortable chair, dryly self-confident, he gave Mrs. Sarah a considered opinion upon Kitty's case. He advised an action in the Probate and Divorce division for the restitution of conjugal rights, while endeavouring to bring out in the course of the proceedings the facts, and to get such relief as to access and maintenance as the law might be disposed to give. Also, the parties interested in the husband might under pressure deem it advisable to compromise.

Kitty was entitled to maintenance, but she could not compel her husband to live with her, or force her presence upon him against his will. And at present he seemed to have no assets and no will. Just so.

Kitty had no claim upon Mrs. St. George. The son appeared to be entirely dependent on the mother, but Alex St. George would presumably be entitled to some compensation or disability allowance as an officer, and

this should extend to his wife. Nor was Kitty the legal guardian of her husband.

Mrs. Sarah listened with an air of solidity.

"So it comes to this. She's got him—and she can keep him, unless we bring an action. And she would do her best to dirty our linen."

"No doubt she would."

"And as to conjugal rights, the poor lad's not capable ——"

"That seems to be the position. It is a rather unusual position. We might get the marriage annulled."

Mrs. Sarah squared her shoulders.

"That's for Kitty to decide. I don't think the law gets us very much further, Robert, thanks all the same. We'll wait to see what Kitty's got to say."

II

Meanwhile, Alex St. George lay and stared at life like a very young child, as though trying to understand it. He stared at his mother; he stared at Leaper; he stared at Dr. Dazely, and appeared particularly interested in the doctor's monocle. He could move his arms, but not his legs, but seeing that his mentality was still that of an infant the paralysis of his legs did not concern him. He had no speech, and was mostly mute, but would make occasional and friendly noises. He showed a desire to finger things, and even to put them into his mouth. He had to be washed and dressed and fed. He had forgotten completely how to do things for himself.

Leaper had an oily and cheerful kindness. He was the sinuous and persuasive autocrat. He called Mr. St. George "sir," though he might just as well have addressed him as "it."

"Now, sir, chin up a little—if you please."

He shaved his patient each morning with a safety-razor, for Dr. Dazely had been very particular in his warnings that Mr. St. George must not be allowed to be in the possession of any cutting implement. The lathering of his face seemed to puzzle and interest Mr. St. George. He would dabble his fingers in it, and examine the white

froth that adhered to his finger-tips, and sometimes he would taste it. He made attempts at conversation, exclamatory noises that sounded like "Goo," and "Da."

Leaper encouraged these noises. He was facetious, and his facetiousness contained a bland contempt.

"Quite so, sir. Goo, goo. I agree with you ab-solutely. Now—for a little towel."

Mrs. St. George would come and sit in the transformed drawing-room that had become an elaborate and costly nursery. Her favourite place was by one of the windows and she sat there rather like a woman on guard. Her whole attitude expressed a cold and possessive tranquillity; she would sit there for an hour on end, watching Cardigan Square, and her son, like a white cat with round blue eyes, strangely and possessively satisfied. It was a silent room. Even as a young mother she had had no baby-talk, and to her man-baby's pathetic gooings and daaings, she would extend a calm and consenting tolerance. Whether she wanted him other than he was it would be difficult to say. Sometimes she sat by the fire and purred with the consciousness of complete possession. She had purchased the most expensive gramophone that could be bought, and a set of popular records. She would rise and place a record on the disc, adjust the needle with deliberate and precise fingers, and let the room fill with sound. Tunes familiar to thousands of homesick men were repeated in that special room, "Roses in Picardy," "I'm in Love," "Fancy your fancying me." Alex would listen wide-eyed; he liked these melodious noises; sometimes he would smile, and glance about the room as though wondering how and whence the sounds originated.

Sometimes she showed him pictures, the kind of pictures that are shown to a child.

For Dr. Dazely had said:

"If the mentality remains as it is—he will have to be re-educated. Yes, everything. He will have to begin over again like an infant. Learn to talk and to read and to dress himself."

But Mrs. St. George was in no hurry. She seemed to revel in the cold glow of complete possession. Never was a child or a grown man more wholly his mother's. He was

her prisoner; he had no will of his own, no purpose that could clash with hers. Never had she been so complete an autocrat.

For she was the woman in possession. She felt that she had those other women beaten and baffled; they could not storm her house and carry off this poor paralyzed thing; she doubted whether—after a little grim dissuasion—they would want to do so. Mr. Test had thrust out his lower lip and looked at her archly. There was no doubt that she had done a very clever thing.

"Discourage 'em, Mrs. St. George, and go on discouraging 'em. Leave the legal part of it to me. If they try to work up a case, we can obstruct 'em at every turn. We can go on obstructing until they are tired and their purses are empty. Worry them; make 'em realize that it's a bad business, a poor speculation. When they realize that there is nothing to be got out of it—— You take me?"

She did.

"I want them—eliminated."

He looked at her slyly.

"How much so? You still wish——?"

"A divorce would be final."

Nursing a stout knee, he ruminated.

"Yes—I think the wife would have a case, if she chose to plead that her husband was incapable of fulfilling the contract. Beat 'em first, and then dangle a bone. They may be precious glad to get the bone and go off with it. Meanwhile—if they try to make trouble—I'll give them obstruction—and more obstruction."

Yes, she thought that she had Vernor Street shut up. She could sit and contemplate the gradual closing of an unpleasant episode that had ended with the war. If necessary she could re-express herself in the re-education of her son. What an opportunity for a woman of five-and-fifty! To have her son given back to her as a grown man to be moulded, recast, treated as flexible metal! A son who might never be complete, and so all the more hers. She compounded with her pride; her pride should be in possession.

He should have every opportunity, of course. She would give him every advantage that did not clash with

her prejudices. She could make life easy for him, fatally easy.

She spoke very seriously to Dr. Dazely.

"Are you—perfectly—satisfied?"

Dr. Dazely was not. The case was an extremely responsible one; that is to say he had accepted his responsibility with well-tailored seriousness. He said that he would like Sir Isidore Browne to see Mr. St. George. Sir Isidore's opinion was the very last thing in opinions.

Mrs. St. George agreed. Sir Isidore Browne was called in—an abrupt little man with a huge nose separating two sharp and irritable little eyes. He passed an hour with Dr. Dazeley beside Alex St. George's bed. They sang a duet over him, Dr. Dazely booming and fluting, Sir Isidore snapping like a mandolin. They disentangled the complexities of the case, its possible neuropathic aspects, its electrical reactions, its mental phenomena. They spoke of stupor and amnesia. Mr. St. George had an undoubted paraplegia. There was definite spasticity of the lower limbs. The knee jerks were exaggerated, especially the left one. Babinski's sign was present.

Sir Isidore probed the case like a bird tapping with a hard but sensitive beak.

"We must have the spine X-rayed."

Dr. Dazely fluted consentingly.

"Yes, we must have him X-rayed."

"The point is—how much of all this is organic and how much of it is functional. There—is—an organic lesion. The war has given us some extraordinary examples of hysteria. As for the mental condition—it may change quite suddenly."

"I have warned his mother. It may be a case for re-education."

"Possibly. But I have seen the normal personality restored by some shock, emotional or otherwise. If there is no change we ought to try hypnosis."

"Would you suggest it to Mrs. St. George?"

Sir Isidore made the suggestion, but Mrs. St. George received it with dislike and suspicion. Hypnosis implied surrender—and interference. She had thought it tarnished with charlatanry. But if modern hypnosis was scientific and professional, was it not also dangerous and too personal? She mistrusted the reaction of another

personality upon the personality of her son. Deep down in her was the consciousness that if there was any hypnotizing to be done—it was she herself who wished to do it.

"I would prefer to wait. Let us see whether a change for the better does not come naturally."

Sir Isidore was a busy man and apt to be impatient.

"Very well, very well, the case is in Dr. Dazely's hands. He understands it perfectly."

Which was true, but Dr. Dazely did not quite understand the inwardness of Mrs. St. George.

III

The solving of problems is supposed to be the prerogative of the very clever, but in the solving of the problems of our human relationships, love, compassion and understanding are still supreme. Yes, and in spite of the highbrows, and the very clever people who are clever because they have ceased to care seriously about anything, and because their organs have lost the warmth and the flush of the adventure of digestion. Hence, when Kitty rose from her bed, and began to feel hungry, she tore down the logic of the law as though she had put her hands to a pair of curtains that kept out the light and the air.

She refused to be legal. Having listened to all that Uncle Robert had to say, and heard his arguments, she swept the whole clutter aside. If she was going to fight for the possession of her husband she would fight in her own way.

Mr. Robert Parsons, dryly kind and requiring everything to be in order, asked her what she could do; and she sat and stared at the table-cloth with obstinate solemnity. She stared at a particular ink-stain that she had made one day when writing to Alex.

"That's for me to find out."

She was more open with her mother. She said:

"I am not going to fight her in that way. It seems to me to be the wrong way to go about it. I don't know, but I feel that there are some things about which one

can't quarrel in public. I'm not going to scuffle with her, as though we were two women squabbling over a bargain at a draper's sale. I care too much. That's reality."

She could not say more; she had no more to say for the moment, but Mrs. Sarah understood. Kitty was not going to soil her linen; she had no intention of recovering it draggled from under Mrs. St. George's feet. She was full of a conscious reverence for her marriage as it had happened to her. She was thinking of Alex as she had seen him at Poynter's Hill. Her love was silent, and reflective and determined; it did not rush out to scream and scold and argue. Her argument was locked up inside her, but it was very much alive, a gradual growth. She was one of those little women who can watch and wait.

Calmly she went back for the time being to the shop and her work. She seemed to carry a hidden lamp, and the flame that she tended burned within. She kept her dignity. She was very conscious of the fact that the life of Vernor Street had changed, and was still changing. The war was over, with its tenseness and its terror and its physical excitements, though a desire for these excitements remained. Men in khaki and out of it came into the shop—but they came differently.

Some of them were in quest of adventure. They suggested dances and little suppers; they bored her; man had lost the supreme significance of the soldier; nor could she pity these lads as of old. Her pity was turned like a beam of light upon that other figure. It bothered her to have idle young men lolling about in the divan, or trying to be seductive across the counter. All this smelt of the war, and the war was over. Also, it was possible that Mrs. St. George had spies in Vernor Street.

Kitty suggested to her mother that the divan should be closed, and it was closed. A card bearing the word "Private" in big black letters was tacked to the door, and when one or two Breezy Berties tried to walk through that notice, Mrs. Sarah dealt with them.

The closing of the divan marked the end of an epoch. The room of the red cushions had had its justification during the war, but when Mrs. Sarah closed it, she could do so with confidence. She had made money. She

could talk of selling the business, but when she did talk of it, and of the social advantages of being a lady at large, Kitty's little fist came down.

"Not on any account. Besides—you would be miserable. I can see you in a villa at Surbiton."

Mrs. Sarah wrinkled up her broad and human nose.

"I'm a Londoner, my dear. No getting away from it. But when you and Corah have homes of your own I may go to Highbury. Highbury isn't what it was—but it pulls me. Besides——"

"You will always be wanted."

"Somehow, my dear, I think I shall. And that reminds me. I'm not going to die with all my rings on my fingers. No sense in that. When you and Corah want it, there will be a nice little sum for both of you. Every girl ought to have some money of her own. So you see."

"I see all sorts of things," said the daughter.

And once a week either she or Corah were seeing the face of Alex's jailor, Mr. David Leaper, who came to buy cigarettes and to take a look round. He was a confidential person. It was he who reported to Mrs. St. George that the divan had been closed, and that her son's wife was still serving in the shop.

In fact, Mr. Leaper got to know Kitty very well by sight, though she knew him only as a rather soapy person with a sudden smile, who came to buy a certain brand of cigarette. She saw so many unlikeable men that Mr. Leaper was without distinction. But one December day, standing at a window in the midst of a yawn, Leaper caught sight of that little figure with its back to the railings of Cardigan Square. His mouth seemed to shut with a snap. He drew back a step and stood watching. He expected to see "That yellow-headed young woman," as he called her, advance to ring the bell of No. 77.

But Kitty did nothing of the sort. She stared at the house for half a minute, as though she was looking right through the walls into the heart of it, and then she moved away. She had been conscious of a moment of inspiration. Something in her had cried out "Of course."

Mr. Leaper reported the incident to Mrs. St. George.

"That young woman, madam, has been hanging about."

Mrs. St. George did not appear to be troubled by the incident. She knew that Kitty might stand there all day, but that her son could not get to the window, and that had he been able to reach the window and see his wife he would not have recognized her. His memory had not returned. It is possible that his mother hoped that it would never return.

IV

That was Kitty's point, the live core of her problem. She had realized it gradually, and then with a final and complete suddenness, and on that December afternoon when Leaper saw her standing by the railings of Cardigan Square, she took the problem away with her to Queen's Walk, and sat with it on the same old seat. A huge red sun was descending into a bank of grey vapour; the fronts of the houses were flushed with the sunset; the grass had a bluish tinge. And the vividness of the London sunset matched the vividness of her inward realization of things.

If Alex remained the Alex of Poynter's Hill—then he was lost to her. He would remain in the house of his mother, remembering nothing of his marriage, and of its intimate moments. The Alex who was her husband would be dead. Mrs. St. George would have regained her child.

Yes—if——?

But if his memory returned, if the old Alex came back to that paralyzed body—what then? He would remember her, and that letter. And still he would be like a helpless child in that other woman's lap, to be coerced and persuaded and fed as his mother would wish him to be fed.

"I must get him away from her," she thought.

But how? And to what purpose? And supposing she were to succeed in recovering her husband, was she to take him to Vernor Street, to a back room overlooking brick walls and chimney-pots, to a home that was not hers in the sense that a woman desires a house to be hers? It

would be like shutting up a poor, brown-eyed rabbit in a hutch.

Her inspiration grew. It even seized something from the possessive cleverness of Mrs. St. George.

"I must do something, make something. I must have a place to take him to."

From that moment her increasing purpose began to shape itself.

CHAPTER XVI

I

HANGING in what had been the drawing-room of No. 77 Cardigan Square, in a recess between the fireplace and one of the windows, was a painting in oils framed in a ponderous frame of gold. Mrs. St. George had won this picture in a raffle at a bazaar. It had been painted by an artist of some note, one Waterfield, who would spend his springs daubing among the Italian lakes, and who liked his colour plastered on like whipped cream. This particular picture showed you a crimson rhododendron flowering in a huge stone jar against a dark sheaf of cypresses. The artist had been intoxicated by the gorgeousness of the massed blossoms, and had let the colour erupt upon his canvas. And yet in spite of its floweriness it had a massive quality that was increased by the heaviness of the frame.

About twelve o'clock on a December night this picture snapped its wire, and came down with a crash upon a little table loaded with bric-à-brac. Leaper, sleeping in a little odd room across the landing, heard the noise, but not being a very bold person, in spite of his prominent jaw, he sat circumspectly on the edge of his bed. If burglars were in the house——!

But in the bedroom on the floor above Mrs. St. George had been roused by the crash. She was a woman of courage. Moreover, the silence that had followed the fall of the picture was broken by a sudden outcry.

Some one was shouting wildly.

Mrs. St. George hurried into a dressing-gown, and descended the stairs. She had a vision of Leaper switching

on the light on the landing below, and wearing a grey flannel sleeping-suit. The outcry continued. Almost it suggested the screaming of a terrified child waking suddenly from a nightmare. But the voice produced sounds that were intelligible.

"Where am I—Kitty—Kitty——"

Leaper got first to the door, but he was not allowed to enter.

"No, stay outside. I will see."

He had opened the door. He gave a push to it, and stood aside, and she went in as though he had ceased to exist for her. She closed the door. The cries from the bed continued. He heard her switch on the lights. There was a moment of silence.

"Alex—my dear boy——"

"Mother!"

II

A sudden reopening of the door caught Leaper in the act of withdrawing from a position of too intimate a curiosity. He drew himself up like a soldier coming to attention. He was aware of the fixity of Mrs. St. George's gaze. Blue-eyed, she was confronting the storm that had burst suddenly in the house, a woman blown about by the wind, yet unconfused by it. She had an air of gripping something, of holding herself rigid, while she steered her purpose.

"You can go back to bed."

That was all she said to him, and he went. But even when the clothes were pulled up under his chin, he continued to listen like a man overawed and dominated by the skirling of the wind. He had heard things, words, fragments of anguish blown about like sea-scud. Behind that smile and that snapping jaw, he was a rather soft and succulent creature, greedy and obsequious, a little emotional. There are certain sensitive and organic spasms that are beyond a man's control, and Leaper had shivered. He had felt a coldness down his spine.

Those outcries, those gropings of a man suddenly

dragged up into the light! He had heard Mr. St. George panting. "What's happened? I—I can't move my legs. How—how——!" And then—suddenly—Mr. St. George had been sick with all the sounds of an immense nausea. And between the retchings and groanings there had been words. "O!—Lord—O, my God!—I remember. It wasn't true—what you wrote in that letter—mother? You know what I mean. Say it wasn't true. I got it—just before—— But where was it? I was being sick—just like this—under a tree——"

Leaper shivered slightly in his bed. He could picture Mrs. St. George grabbing a basin, and holding Mr. Alex's head. And that voice of hers, like a steady and controlling hand exerting pressure. O, yes, she was in control of the situation, a most efficient woman, a formidable woman——

III

Mrs. St. George sat holding her son's head against her shoulder. It was a most conventional attitude, but, to her, feeling elemental was to be outside the conventions. She spoke soothingly. She had turned off the ceiling lights, and left the shaded globe burning on the table beside the bed. Like most women of her type—and they are legion—she was the incarnation of a purpose. She urged and she guided. She was not so much conscious of her son as a separate, quivering, human entity, as of something that was attached to her, something that had come out of her body. She wanted to possess him, to contain him—mentally if not physically.

"Don't be afraid. Let things come easily. Of course—the shock of it——"

Both her voice and her arm exerted pressure. He had become quiet. His recovered consciousness, thrown suddenly to the surface, had ceased to cry out and to struggle. It floated, relaxed and bewildered.

"But—mother, I want to know about—things."

She said: "My dear, of course you do. But there is no hurry. Just try and lie still."

And all the while she was striving towards the creating

of her woman's impression, to stamp it indelibly upon the wax of his recovered consciousness. She was doing what all of us do, and if challenged—fiercely deny the doing of it. She understood that the first impression might be of supreme significance. The thing had to be done delicately; she was no charwoman with a brush.

"I want to hear about—things."

"What things—dear?"

"About—how I came here."

"I brought you here from the hospital."

"And the war?"

"The war is over."

The news seemed to astound him.

"We won——? They gave in?"

"Yes."

"How long have I been—like I was?"

"For weeks. Ever since——"

She felt a trembling of his body, and she took one of his hands. She was moved; her inward qualms were fierce and combative.

"My dear," she said; "don't worry. Let things come easily. I'm here; I shall always be here."

His hand lay limply in hers. She was aware of a new silence. It made her think of a little dark hollow like an empty sack into which you could drop what you pleased. There were questions which he dared not ask, but he was breathless to ask them. His reawakened consciousness was all interrogation. It was a raw surface that asked to be covered. And this raw surface was her opportunity. She was aware of all this—as women can be—and feeling the urge of her own awareness.

She said: "Don't you think you could go to sleep?"

His answer was immediate and poignant.

"I've been asleep all these weeks. Has—she—been here to see me?"

"No."

The word slipped out. She was committed to it, and to feel committed is to feel the more convinced. She was right, she insisted on being right; she clutched her rightness and her son.

"Not once?"

"Once—at the hospital."

She gave the impression that these facts were being dragged from her. She felt out of breath with her effort, for an effort it was. She showed emotion.

"Alex—dear, don't ask these questions to-night. Try and go to sleep. Leave things over—— I'll sit here."

He was silent for some moments. He seemed to be slipping down into a stupor of realization.

"Only once. But—mater, hasn't she tried?"

Mrs. St. George grew rigid.

"My dear, I won't talk of this to-night. I refuse to talk about it. I have got you back—from the war. I won't have—these—these—sordid facts——"

He gave a kind of quiet little moan, and turned his head so that his face lay against her bosom.

IV

At eight o'clock next morning Leaper came softly into the room to pull up the blinds and let in the greyness of a December morning. He too looked grey, though he wore a suit of blue serge. He moved softly, with an ingratiating discretion, and even his handling of the blinds was tactful.

Turning, he found the eyes of the man in the bed fixed on him, and Leaper unhinged his smile.

"Good morning, sir. I'm Leaper, sir. I look after you."

Mr. St. George did not reply. He lay very flat in the bed, and his eyes went to the familiar windows, and the outline of the naked trees in the square. Leaper's smile disappeared and came again. He was sorry for the man in the bed, as sorry as his profession would allow him to be.

"Would you like a cup of tea, sir?"

Mr. St. George's glance wandered about the room.

"How long have I been here?"

"Some weeks, sir."

"Were you in the war?"

"No, I was just too old, sir. And I was wanted

badly—at home. Yes, I'll clear up all that mess, sir, presently."

For the man in the bed was looking at the picture where it still lay face downwards on the floor, together with the various objects it had knocked off the table.

"That's what brought me back."

"Yes, sir. Strange coincidence. If I may offer my congratulations——"

Mr. St. George's eyes seemed to open very wide; the lids made a flickering movement. And suddenly those eyes grew moist.

"Thanks. But—not much—to be congratulated——"

Leaper, looking shocked, went swiftly out of the room, mumbling something about a cup of tea.

When he had gone, Mr. St. George lay still for a while, staring at the ceiling. He was aware of his tears and strangely unashamed of them. They blurred the white surface of the ceiling; but what did it matter, for was not everything blurred, confused, horrible? He was conscious of a weight inside his head. His whole head felt heavy, too heavy to be raised from the pillow. But could he raise it? He made the attempt, and found that he could, and going yet further, dug his elbows into the bed, and managed to raise himself a little. But his legs? They lay there stretched out like a couple of sandbags, and suddenly he fell back, letting his head sink deep into the pillow. He turned his head so that his face was half-hidden in the pillow. He caught a fold of the case between his teeth, and lay rigid, trying to stifle a part of him that wanted to shout for help. And the cry that rose on him was for "Kitty—Kitty."

He remained like that for a minute. The lower jaw relaxed; he turned his head slowly, and lay again looking up at the ceiling, at that blank white surface. His face had an extraordinary tremulous wistfulness. He seemed to be whispering, but without making a sound. A man's phrase—a war phrase—seemed to trickle into his head. Everything was na poo, a wash-out. His marriage—— He felt empty, like a body without a stomach. His head began to ache.

Leaper came in with the tea. It was an obsequious and persuasive Leaper who encouraged him to drink it.

"That's it, sir. You'll feel better, sir. Do you think you could bear to be shaved, sir, presently?"

"Leave me alone for a bit, will you, there's a good chap."

"Certainly, sir."

"I want to think—try to."

"Of course, sir. I've brought up a little handbell, sir. I'll put it here. If you want me——"

"All right. Is—my—Mrs. St. George up yet?"

"No, sir; I think not, sir. Here's the bell, quite handy. And what time would you like your breakfast, sir?"

"O, any time, Leaper."

Leaper had left Mr. St. George less than five minutes when the handbell was rung and the male nurse hurried in to see what Mr. St. George's need was.

"I want to write a letter."

"A letter, sir?"

"Get me some note-paper. Do you happen to have a fountain-pen?"

"I have, sir."

Leaper bustled about. He had to raise Mr. St. George in bed, and prop him up with an additional cushion or two.

"How's that, sir?"

"Splendid. I'll ring again when I want you, Leaper."

He wrote his letter to Kitty. It was very simple and straight, the kind of letter that he might have written to her had nothing of this happened to him. Its message was—"Kitty, I want you. I'm in the dark; I'm lost. Where are you?" When he had fastened up the envelope, he remembered that he had neither stamps nor money. But what did that matter? He rang the bell for Leaper, and lay looking at the address on the envelope, "Mrs. Alex St. George, No. 7 Vernor Street."

"Yes, sir?"

Leaper stood in the doorway.

"Put a stamp on this for me, Leaper, will you, and post it at once."

"At once, sir?"

"Yes, please."

"Certainly, sir."

Alex St. George let himself sink down in the bed, much as though he had accomplished some notable thing, and could do no more for the moment. His head ached and he felt full of a dull confusion. The effort of writing that letter, those three minutes of mental and emotional concentration, had exhausted him. He heard the shutting of the door, and he closed his eyes. He thought—"She must come to me now. If she cares—she will come. But why didn't she come before? That letter——? O—impossible! And yet! And yet?" He felt more and more confused and weary—— Meanwhile, Leaper was standing on the landing with the letter in his hand, and Mrs. St. George was descending the stairs. Leaper did not offer to show her the letter, but he stood and held it so that she could not fail to see it. The responsibility would not be his.

She saw it instantly, but she did not at once betray her seeing of it. She spoke in a controlled, maternal voice.

"Is Mr. St. George awake?"

"Yes, madame. He has had a cup of tea."

"I meant to have been down sooner. I was very tired. I was with him till four o'clock. He fell asleep. What is that, Leaper?"

He handed her the letter, and his voice was subdued.

"Mr. St. George has just written it, madam. He asked me to post it."

She looked at the address on the envelope. Her face had an attentive calmness. She moved on to the next flight of stairs, making a sign to Leaper. He followed her down to the dining-room, where the table was laid for breakfast. She told him to shut the door. She stood in front of the fire, looking down at it.

"Leaper, your other responsibility begins to-day. Do you remember what I said to you?"

She seemed to fascinate him with her complete calmness.

"Yes, madam. Undesirable people——"

"Quite so. My son must be protected—from these people. Any letters—such as this one——"

Deliberately she bent down and put the letter on the fire, watching it blacken and curl and burn. No words

were needed. Leaper understood; he backed softly to the door.

"Excuse me, madam—but what am I to tell Mr. St. George if he asks me?"

She spoke as though giving him an order.

"If Mr. St. George asks you—you will of course tell him that you posted that letter."

V

For two days Alex St. George lay and watched the rain come down. The grey of the December sky did not cease to empty itself upon the tops of the plane-trees, and the man in the bed felt the drip of it inside his head. He was suffering from a mental confusion. His thoughts seemed to drift about in a fog with a sense of difficulty and distress. The realization of what he was and what he might be lay heavy upon him, pressing him down into a pulp of lethargy and depression.

The one glowing point in this confusion was his thought of that letter to Kitty. If she was lost at sea, this was the one light that remained. And so he lay and waited, unable to do anything, with a head that ached, and thoughts that drifted vaguely. He could make no effort of any kind; he felt even more helpless in the presence of his mother; her blue eyes looking down at his seemed to congeal and to render him mute. There were moments when he wanted to tell her—"I have written to Kitty. I want to see Kitty;" but he had not the will-force inside him. His lips could not even begin to shape the words.

Dr. Dazely came.

Alex liked Dr. Dazely. He was soft and sententious and kind, dangerously kind. He demanded no effort. His large white face and fluty voice were soporific.

"Don't worry, my dear sir. Perfect rest—perfect rest. Leave everything to us."

To Mrs. St. George Dr. Dazely said that it was imperative that her son should be sheltered from all excitement.

"In these cases—you know—the mentality cannot be considered normal. Months, perhaps, a question of months. They are apt to be irritable, moody, emotional. I want him to be wrapped up in cotton wool."

She asked for nothing better than counsel such as this. She would apply the cotton wool; she would shut out the world, and all jarring emotions; she felt that she had been justified in burning that letter.

She asked Dr. Dazely to give very definite instructions to Leaper. Such orders—professionally given—would reinforce her own, and Dr. Dazely did so. Mr. St. George was to be humoured in every way, as a sick child is humoured, but behind this humouring was to be careful and kind restraint. No letters, no visitors, no excitements.

"Cotton wool, Leaper, cotton wool."

Meanwhile, Mr. St. George lay and waited. That speck of light in his confused world still glimmered. On the third day he asked Leaper questions, but he asked them like a sick man, with a kind of deprecating gentleness.

"No letter for me, Leaper?"

"No, sir."

"No one has called?"

"No one. Only Dr. Dazely, and one or two ladies."

"What kind of ladies?"

"Elderly ladies, sir, friends of Mrs. St. George."

There was a pause, and Alex's fingers picked nervously at the bedclothes.

"You posted that letter, Leaper?"

"Which letter, sir?"

"The one I wrote—that morning."

"Of course, sir."

On the evening of that third day, while his mother was below—dining—Mr. St. George called Leaper to him. He was very restless; his eyelids flickered; his hands could not keep still.

"I want to write another letter, Leaper."

"You oughtn't to tire yourself, sir."

"I must write it."

Leaper shrugged the shoulders of his soul, and humoured him. It was a scrawl of a letter, excited,

pathetic, hardly legible, and when it was finished and fastened up, it was placed in Leaper's large damp hand.

"At once—Leaper. Don't tell anybody."

Leaper went out of the room, and Alex St. George lay and listened. He heard the opening and closing of the front door, but he could not know that Leaper had indulged in a piece of make-believe, and was tiptoeing into the dining-room. Mrs. St. George was alone. Without a word, and as though the thing was burning his fingers, Leaper placed the letter on the table beside her plate.

She looked at it, and said nothing, but later that evening she rang for the male nurse. She was seated at her desk; she held something crisp and white in her right hand.

She said: "Loyal service is appreciated."

She passed him four five-pound notes.

VI

And Alex St. George lay and waited, with toys and luxuries beginning to accumulate about him. Two ingenious tables had arrived, that could be swung across the bed and tilted at any angle, and with one of these tables on either side he had only to stretch out a hand to turn on a gramophone or pick up a book or a magazine. There were no less than a dozen magazines on a table. He was allowed to smoke, but the silver cigarette-box that contained the different brands of cigarettes made him think too much of Vernor Street. He had fruit and flowers within reach, jig-saw puzzles, writing-materials, papers, tobacco, matches, chocolates, a morning and evening paper. Twice a day Leaper massaged his paralyzed legs. He had his nails manicured. He could watch the flames of a cheerful fire leaping in the grate.

His mother's kindness smothered him. It smelt of flowers and fruit, and of the finest of soaps. It showed him all the world in pictures; it gave him music to which he could not dance. He could draw the softest

of crimson-covered down quilts up under his chin, and yet he lay inert and was dully conscious of a helpless crave in him, of an increasing sadness. He was like a man slipping slowly down a well, while the little circle of light up above grew less and less, and as it diminished he began to realize the nature of the surrounding darkness. Kitty had not come to him; she had not replied to either of those two letters; therefore—all that his mother had charged her with—— He tried to struggle against an increasing loss of faith in her, but his struggles were not those of a normal man; he was weak, far weaker than his normal self; he was irritable; he had moments of anger when he told himself that he did not care.

But one afternoon, when the windows were darkening, and the plane-trees in the square were growing dim, his mother found him in tears. She pushed a table aside, and drawing up a chair, sat down, bending over him. He jerked his face away, but he began to blurt out scalding words.

"It's true what you wrote. She hasn't been; she hasn't written. I couldn't have believed it."

Mrs. St. George laid a hand on his head

"My dear——"

She shivered inwardly, for her purpose was ice.

"Why—why——?"

It was the little wailing boy who cried to her.

"Alex—I had better speak. Isn't it obvious? She saw you once, the difference in you. And then—I suppose——"

He seemed to cower down in the bed.

"Mater—how horrible!"

"My dear—I'm sorry——"

She was sorry; she was being wounded, shocked, but she set her teeth. She was in the right a thousand times in the right; she was being cruel to be kind; she would hold him from these women, from that deplorable war madness.

"Alex, my dear, do you remember—I used to tell you that you were blind? It hurts you now—to see. But it would hurt you more——"

He turned suddenly to her in the dusk that wavered with the flicker of the fire.

"Have they done nothing——?"

"The girl came to see me—once—but before she had seen you at Poynter's Hill. The mother tried to see me—afterwards. I'm a rich woman, Alex—and you——"

She made herself meet his dim, wide eyes. They were frightened eyes.

"Is it—that she didn't want me any more—when I was like that——?"

Mrs. St. George was silent, and her silence was the most eloquent and the most comprehensive of answers.

CHAPTER XVII

I

MEANWHILE, Kitty clasped her problem much as she had held her husband's head in her arms. She took it to bed with her, and it kept her awake, and she woke with it in the morning, and it sat squarely at the breakfast-table staring at the bacon dish or the pot of marmalade. Certainly it was a devil of a problem. She was alone with it; she had brushed the lawyers aside.

But the chief difficulty remained in that she had no knowledge of her husband's condition, and whether she was to plan for an infant or for a man. Alex was shut up in his mother's house, and she was shut out of it. She could presume from the fitting of that grille to the front door, and from Mrs. Sarah's experience, that it would not be possible for her to surprise the defences of No. 77. It was a ridiculous situation, an exasperating situation. She could watch the house and see who went in and out. Assuredly a doctor would be one of the visitors to No. 77, and she would have every right to accost the doctor who was in charge of her husband's case, and to question him. Letters—of course—would be useless. If Mrs. St. George was as determined as she—Kitty—knew herself to be, then all letters to Alex would be censored, and the forbidden ones stopped.

She had decided to waylay Alex's medical man when an unexpected ally appeared at No. 7 Vernor Street, even Mr. Jimmy Grimshaw, demobilized, but still in khaki for a month, and spending a week in town before solemnly incarcerating his cheerful and warlike soul in the city of Exeter. He came in, red and smiling, more polished than usual, to grip her hand across the cigars and cigarettes.

"Jimmy——"

She glowed. She looked into his droll, ironical, honest eyes, and held his hand firmly.

"The very man I want."

"Good business. How's old Alex? I suppose——"

"I want to tell you about Alex. They have taken him away from me, Jimmy."

She took Mr. Grimshaw upstairs, and Corah went down to take charge of the shop. Mrs. Sarah was out shopping. Kitty made Grimmy sit down in the best chair, the chair that had been re-sprung and re-upholstered since Armistice Day; she pushed a box of cigarettes at him, and taking one herself, rolled a tuffet into the middle of the hearthrug, and sat down.

"I want you to go and see Alex for me, Grimmy."

"Right-o. Some hospital?"

"No, at his mother's. I had better tell you all about it, Grimmy. I know you will believe that I am telling you the truth."

Jimmy Grimshaw did know something about women; or rather—he had that peculiar male flair for divining the real inwardness of a woman. He was not concerned with woman as a creature of emotional subtleties or æsthetic or intellectual tendencies; he was concerned with the good 'uns and the wrong 'uns, the givers and the takers. He was a young man of a good deal of self-assurance. He sat back and smiled, and kept quiet, and watched Kitty. She told him the amazing story, and he believed it, just as stoutly as he believed in the reality of that solid little figure on the tuffet, with the glow of the firelight on its determined face. Kitty was no wrong'un, and she was very much up against it.

He said: "What a damned shame! Do you mean to tell me that she has got poor old Alex shut up?"

"She has shut him in—and she has shut me out."

"But, my dear Kitty, such things aren't done in a civilized country."

"But they are done. You remember those letters you sent back to me?"

"Of course."

She had the most difficult part of the confession before her, but she went through it with deliberate courage, while Mr. Grimshaw sat tapping a khaki leg with a cane.

He looked just a little more red in the face. His fighting temperament kept step with Kitty's. Under his breath he was referring to Mrs. St. George in the language of the fighting male, as a red she-dog—language that would grow less colourful and more chaste in that Exeter office.

"So—you see—Grimmy," she was saying, "I don't know whether he is as I saw him at Poynter's Hill, or whether his memory has come back. I want to find out."

His dark eyes lit up.

"But aren't you going to fight?"

"Of course I'm going to fight, but in my own way; I have had my legal opinion, and I've turned it down, Grimmy——"

He sat and stared at her.

"Well, what am I to do?"

"I want you to go and see Alex. Most probably they will let you see him. And you can come back and tell me."

He gave a last smack to his leg.

"Right-o. I'll go—at once. I'll raid their defences. By Jove, what a woman!"

"She's right—in her way," said Kitty; "just as right as I am in mine."

He must have hurried, for he was back with her in a little over the hour, sitting in front of the fire, and looking sobered.

He told Kitty that he had taken a taxi both ways. Yes, he had not found it easy to enter the house; they had kept him waiting on the steps—a fellow with a bad breath had spoken to him through a confounded little squint-hole in the door. Almost incredible, what? Mrs. St. George had come in person and had parleyed with him. "Oh, Mr. Grimshaw? Yes, Alex has often spoken of you." She had allowed him to be admitted like a visitor into a prison, you know, or into a private lunatic asylum.

At this point he filled and lit a pipe, for a cigarette was too flimsy to satisfy his feelings. He did not look at Kitty; he stared at the fire.

"Fine house—you know. Carpets like grass, and lots of old pictures. She took me upstairs. O, yes, but before she did that I was scrutinized and given my orders. It was most important that poor old Alex should not

be excited. Doctor's orders. She said I might stay five minutes."

He blew smoke, and watched a waft of it go up the chimney.

"She went up the stairs in front of me, and somehow I felt like part of a procession——"

"Grimmy," said Kitty suddenly, with her fists in her lap, "tell me what I want to know."

He nodded his head.

"Sorry. Alex is *compos mentis*—as sane as you or I. But—my lord——!"

"What?"

"He nearly fell out of bed at me. His room is like a sort of toy shop, or a stall at a bazaar—every sort of gadget. I seemed to be wading through books and magazines and gramophone records, and bowls of flowers. It smelt like a greenhouse, full of soft fug. But—she—was there——"

"All the time?"

"You bet. She sort of smothered him down on the pillows. I was made to sit about two yards off while she commanded the bed. Very formal—I can assure you. She had a hand on his pulse—so to speak—all the time. And that fellow with the flat teeth and the breath was just outside the door. I felt muzzled—as though I had a gas-mask on."

He puffed smoke in silence for some seconds.

"We chatted like a couple of polite old ladies at a tea-party. I couldn't say—— If I had blurted out—anything—— And old Alex lay and looked at me. The thing that got me—was his eyes."

Kitty's fists were under her chin.

"Just how?"

"Frightened eyes—my dear—seemed to stand out of his head, with the whites showing all round them. As if he were wanting to shout for help—and couldn't. They made me feel funny."

She glanced at Grimshaw's square profile.

"Dear old Grimmy! So—it was just like that. And you came away."

"I did. I had one handshake. His hand was like a soft and bulgy kid-glove. No heart in it. He wanted to say things and couldn't, and I had half a mind to blow

up. But—after all—I might have been like a bull in a china shop. She marched me out of the room and down the stairs. She was as polite as hell. How long was I staying in London? A few days—only. And going back to civilization and work? It was kind of me to come and see Alex. He was not allowed to see visitors. Whether she suspected me, I don't know, but I am pretty sure that that fellow with the breath would be told not to let me inside the house again. And that's—that. You've got a problem, Kit."

She stared at the fire.

"I have," she said.

He caught her smiling the strangest of smiles.

"But now, I do know—where I am, Grimmy. It's not all fog. You've helped me—no end."

"Wish I could see it like that," said he.

II

But in dispelling her uncertainty as to her husband's mental state, Jimmy Grimshaw had drawn aside a curtain. Kitty could look through the windows of that first-floor room and see Alex lying in bed, helplessly the son of his mother, and surrounded by her multifarious persuasions. Most vividly was she conscious of his frightened eyes, and just as Grimshaw had described them, the eyes of a dumb man unable to call for help.

Yes, it was very obvious that Mrs. St. George had been exercising powers of mental suggestion as well as her opportunities for physical control, but Kitty decided to test her enemy's defences, and the alertness and spirit of the defenders. She began by posting a letter to her husband, and when it remained unacknowledged, she sent him a registered letter, which was no more successful. Her next move was to dispatch a reply-paid telegram. The reply consisted of three words—"Sender not known." After these repulses she walked to Cardigan Square, dropped a letter into the letter-box of No. 77, rang the bell, and waited.

The panel of the grill was slipped to one side.

"Yes—what do you want—please?"

It was Leaper's voice. She said: "I have put a letter in the box for Mr. St. George. Will you please see that he gets it?"

The grill was closed, but she remained on he door-step, listening to the sounds of retreating footsteps. Presently she heard someone else come to the door and unlock the letter-box, and she felt sure that the person who extracted that letter was Mrs. St. George. All her messages to Alex were anticipated.

She returned to Vernor Street. She went up to her room, took off her hat and sat down on the bed. She faced the situation as she would have faced a mirror, determined to see everything in it, even to the very spot she might find on her chin.

She realized Alex's helplessness. Either everything was being kept from him, or it was served up to him specially cooked and flavoured. She had to assume complete concealment or studied distortion. He knew nothing, or knew too much.

No longer was he the Alex of Maleham, or the Alex who had sat beside her in this little bed, but a paralyzed, bedridden child, exposed to any sort of suggestion, coerced, drugged, fooled, whispered to. He was like a plant in a greenhouse, neatly tied to a stick, and made to grow in the direction of the light—the light that his mother chose to admit. His helplessness was complete. It looked out at her from his dumb and frightened eyes.

He was helpless—too—in every other way. He had not a penny of his own. She supposed that he was entitled to some pension or allowance if he claimed it, but would he be allowed to claim it? Mrs. St. George would not see the necessity. Obviously, his mother would prefer to hold him as her pensioner. He was paralysed in the legs; he had no profession, no weapon, no power to make money.

"O, poor lad!"

She could look at the problem through his eyes. She could see its pitiful and humiliating features. It made her hot and angry and fiercely compassionate. Already she was beginning to suspect that the other woman might not want him to be other than he was, that she might be planning to keep him as he was. A paralyzed child! A man—shorn of his manhood, pulped, emasculated,

enervated, confined in a hot-house! He might grow soft and flabby and fat, a decadent thing, a consenting creature, sucking at the sweet things this woman gave him.

Kitty rose from the bed.

"It is up to me. It is my job."

III

A Londoner does not go to Leith Hill in January, and sit upon the wet turf and look out over far horizons, but Kitty began to visit places almost as unexpected as Leith Hill. She had talked the matter over with her mother, and they had sat down together before the Vernor Street fire, and gone into ways and means. That Mrs. Sarah approved of the adventure and was ready to help in financing it, proved how much she loved a large and human gesture, and how solid her faith was in her daughter. And—after all—that other woman was reading them a lesson in thoroughness. It was not a mere question of window-dressing, or of amateur gardening in a backyard, with a packet of this and a packet of that, and a few nasturtiums to cover the lapses. There were to be no lapses in Kitty's progress, though she was putting the cart before the horse.

"I could sell out my 'Cobbolds.' "

The ordinary shares of Messrs. Cobbold & Co., were showing some vitality, and Mrs. Sarah would not hear of Kitty selling out. Mrs. Sarah brought out a little black ledger, the Book of the Dooms, and with a page of a financial journal spread upon the table, she and Kitty went into ways and means. Mrs. Sarah enjoyed figures. When she scribbled down an 8, it was as rotund and as solid as herself.

"I can back my fancy," she observed, "just as well as the woman of Cardigan Square can back hers. Supposing I put down a thousand, poppet, to begin with."

"I'll pay you five per cent."

"Is it likely!"

"O—yes—I will. If I am to go into business—let it be business."

Mrs. Sarah closed the little black ledger, and wrinkled up her nose.

"You can put five per cent. back into the show, my dear. Besides, you won't be able to live on air for the first six months. Here am I—a fat old woman—with seven thousand or so—without counting the business—— I have been saving money hard. I have had one or two lucky speculations. Don't be in a hurry. But you won't be."

Kitty scribbled figures on a blotting-pad.

"I'm in a hurry—but I shan't lose my head."

"I can allow you two hundred and fifty a year while you are working yourself in."

"I'll pay it back."

"If you are made that way. But what do you think I saved money for? Just to sit on it like an old hen on a china egg? Hardly."

"Mother," said Kitty, with a sudden stare, "you are about the dearest thing that ever was. If life is giving instead of grabbing——"

"One has to grab to give, my dear, sometimes. I did not learn my economics at a university. I learnt them in Bethnal Green and Westminster. You go ahead."

IV

Kitty went ahead, but her progress was deliberate if adventurous. She—too—took a motor-bus to Highbury, and on two evenings talked solid, material business with Uncle Robert, who found it quite unnecessary to discourage Kitty as he had to discourage so many enthusiasts, young and old. She had ideas beyond hat shops and chicken farms. In fact, he was a little astonished at the scope and the thoroughness of her preparations. She had ideas, quite a number of ideas, but they were ordered and logical. She had no intention of sowing all her seeds with a sweep of the hand, and expecting them all to germinate and produce impossible results.

She said: "I know one has got to take risks, but it seems to me that you have got to know just when to take them. When you think you see a certainty, and

the other fellow hasn't begun to think about it at all——"

Mr. Parsons nodded over his pipe.

"But I am not going to risk my bed and my roof. The first little place I get into must be solid, a safe thing—however small. I shall look down at the thing inside and out before I put my money down. One ought to be able to look ahead."

"Just what your mother did."

"Quite so. But if you hear—of any little business—being up for sale. Lawyers do?"

"We do. Any particular district?"

"On the river—if possible. I want to get in before the rush comes. I am doing some investigating—myself."

"You don't mind—what sort of business?"

"Something that I can run myself—keep in my own hands——"

For Kitty was remembering Maleham, the Maleham of those seven green and quiet days when she had learnt to know her Alex, the cloud watcher, the idler under trees, the sensitive boy-man of a husband. He was her contrast. She was touched by the very things in him which she had not—his dreaminess, his little irresponsibilities, his too easy generosities. She might have a Frenchwoman's capacity for business, but she had what the majority of Frenchwomen do not appear to possess—romantic affection as well as animal affection. The shadows in her shop would have that indefinable quality of mystery; her fields would be more than orderly and productive chessboards under an illogical sky. She had Maleham in her mind, not Maleham itself, but something a little like it, and with more life to it, the life of the river, of that inimitable old Thames that is English of the English from Oxford to The Nore. Almost like a mother she remembered her man's love of trees and green places, and waving grass and sun-dappled backwaters, and the sweeping silver of broad reaches, and the poplars and the sound of the wind in them. He had loved to watch beasts browsing knee-deep in meadows, and the sickled wings of swallows cutting the air, and the sunlight of the shadow upon the upon the beechwoods. He had talked of farming.

What did he or she know of farming? Nothing. But she had in her mind a picture of some little place where she could be busy while he would have his river, his green spaces and his trees. Yes, if she should win him back, rescue him from that luxurious misery, she would wish him to lie where he could look at the sky and the river. There is laughter in life, laughter that wells up from nowhere. Such laughter would not come to him in Cardigan Square.

And so, like a little sturdy person, clasping her basket of love and of shrewd practical endeavour, she went in search of her new Maleham, her Isle of Apples that was to be more than an island of dreams. She had one supreme advantage, she knew what she wanted, and she was the daughter of Mrs. Sarah.

CHAPTER XVIII

On a grey and muggy day, with the river a foot above its summer level, and flowing like oil, Kitty discovered Shelford. She had received a hint from Uncle Robert, who had picked up some gossip while lunching in the city with the managing clerk of a firm of solicitors who dealt largely in real estate. Mr. Parsons had communicated with Vernor Street. "An odd bit of property at Shelford—on the market. Place called Vine Cottage. What one would describe as a job lot, I imagine. I thought you might like to look at it." Kitty took the train to Staines. At half-past ten in the morning she was in conversation with a depressed and leaden-eyed purveyor of punts and boats who, wearing a dirty old white sweater, grey trousers, and gum-boots, was moving about with a paint-pot.

"Have you a motor-boat for hire?"

A motor-boat for hire in January, with the river as dead as a stuck eel, and the Armistice less than three months old! The boat-owner looked at her sourly. Even pessimism seemed mute in him.

"What do you think!"

She said: "I want to go down to Shelford and look at it from the river. I want to be left at Shelford. Have you got a boat?"

The man glanced at his boat-house as though he had a grudge against it.

"Boats! O, yes, we've been very busy with boats! They don't eat their heads off like 'orses."

"Well, I want one. How far is it to Shelford?"

"Three mile or less. But I ain't got a man; not even a damned boy."

She said: "Well, aren't you a man? How much do you want?"

He got out a boat and sculled her down to Shelford, and the exercise seemed to loosen his congealed figure so that he grew more conversational in a jerky and discursive fashion. He had a grievance. The war had changed everything; nothing would ever be the same again, not even the river. As for the boys, of all the arrogant, impertinent, spoilt young brutes! Yes, even the boys were profiteering! He would pause now and again and let the boat glide, and fix his depressed and aggravated eyes on Kitty. "You may believe or—or not, but you'll never see Boulter's Lock like it used to be." She let him talk, and won her first glimpse of Shelford over a swinging shoulder and the bulge of a dirty white sweater. She saw Shelford as a redness beside the brimming river, a clustering of old leafless trees, a green ascent rising to black beechwoods. She saw the square stunted tower of the church, a little lighter in its greyness than the sky, the red Georgian houses, the black and white of the Ship Inn, the queer old cottages and bits of garden. It lay all on the south bank; the northern bank showed her nothing but meadows and trees, and the Ferry Inn where Ferry Lane came down to the river. It seemed to float to her over the water.

The man lay on his sculls, and looked morosely over his left shoulder.

"It's dead," he said, "dead as a damned rat."

She smiled faintly. She was looking at something that pleased her, but she wanted him to talk.

"After the war—you mean."

"I do. Why—on a Sunday—you'd see boats putting in there—by the dozen. And the Abbot's Close full of cars. And Bunt's boat-house there quite lively. Shut up now. He used to do quite a nice lot of boat-building Broke—broke to the world. And all because of those silly pigs of Germans——"

His lugubriousness had a meaning for her.

"Do you know a place called Vine Cottage?"

"That's Vine Cottage. Next to Bunt's boat-house. Used to do quite well with teas—in a small way. I've seen half a dozen tables there on a Sunday afternoon."

Kitty saw the place as a low, rambling, reddish cottage,

shaped like a letter L, and dipping its garden into the river. There were fruit trees, and two or three old yews, a stretch of grass, and a derelict-looking summer-house. Two chimney-stacks stood up red and square. The roof tiles were the colour of old rusty iron. The small windows blinked from white frames. A vine, roses and wistaria struggled up the walls, and in autumn a virginia creeper splashed one gabled end a vivid crimson. Between the garden and the boat-house a magnificent plane-tree rose, piping from its trunk a great spray of greyish branches.

"Floods ever reach there?" asked Kitty.

"Never knew them to reach the house. I've known them reach Bunt's boat-house, because he cut into the bank for his level. Looks a bit homesick—this time of year. Want me to land you at the ferry steps?"

"Please."

He landed her at the steps, and she found herself in Lime Walk between rows of pollarded lime-trees. Her impulse was to wander and to explore before viewing Vine Cottage, and she walked on into the open space that was known as Abbot's Close, where three old Georgian houses with white doors and architraves and window-sashes faced the Ship Inn. Abbot's Hostel, a Charles II foundation, embracing a little cobbled courtyard, lay on the west of the Close. Here were more lime-trees, and Kitty stood under one of them and looked at the Ship Inn. It appeared whiter than it was, and being a woman she had an eye for blinds and curtains and the significance of such details. She decided to have lunch at the Ship Inn, and test its imagination; she believed in imagination as a business asset; imagination created opportunities.

She wandered on. She explored what appeared to be the main street of Shelford, until it languished into two rows of workmen's cottages; she examined the shops. They were so obvious, as obvious as the brussels sprouts in the greengrocer's baskets, or the peaches and tinned fruit in the grocers' window. There was no gleam of a "Come hither" in the eyes of these shops; they offered you no sense of adventure; they aroused no curiosity; and Kitty, pausing outside the window of the local draper's, and scrutinizing the hats, knew at once what was wrong with them.

"You old maid of a shop!"

For, after all, if you did not succeed in interesting people, and in picquing their curiosity, they would come dully into your shop and ask without imagination for the dull stuff you offered them. "Three penn'orth of vinegar, please." You and they remained dull, trading the obvious, and your turnover became as slothful as a change of posture in bed. The thing was to have a different kind of carrot to dangle in front of the nose of the ass of habit, and to dangle it differently.

She walked on to look at the sturdy old church, with its yews and its great cedar, and at the rectory, planted among trees behind a high red-brick wall.

"That's old England," she reflected. "And there's a new England coming. Bound to be. That fellow in the boat could not see three miles down the river. If people wanted to play—before the war, surely they'll be wanting to play twice as hard after four years of war. We are starving for play. And my play is going to be——? O, well!"

She smiled at the church tower and turned to walk down River Lane. It ran parellel to the Thames, and fifty yards of it and of little old houses and odd shops brought her to some gardens and an orchard, and opposite the orchard stood Vine Cottage. It had a board up "For Sale. Apply Within." It had a queer little white porch perched on two slim white legs. It was both cottage and shop, showing to the passers in the lane a long, low, old-fashioned shop window full of tired articles —cigarettes, tins of tobacco, cheap pipes, boxes of chocolates with the ribbon faded, jars of sweets, picture postcards. "Everything and nothing," as Kitty described it. She stood back in the lane, and examined the red walls, the windows and the roof. The place looked solid. It had that English cosiness, a ripe rightness. It gave you the feeling that it had grown there.

She was offered two doors of entry, the green one with the brass knocker under the porch, and the white shop door with its two glass panels. She chose the shop door. A bell tinkled. She stepped down six inches to worn, brown linoleum. She saw untidy shelves, and a counter covered with white American cloth, on it a pair of scales and a bottle of bull's-eyes. A woman came through a

door from the back, and looked at Kitty as though she had come to collect a subscription.

She was a very tired woman, completely colourless, with one of those dusty skins, and pale lips crimped over prominent teeth. Her fair hair was dragged back as though some hand seized it each morning with relentless and worrying haste. She stooped. She had one of those faces that never smile. Her pale eyes suggested that life was tiresome, and so properly dull that to indulge in a smile was an impropriety.

She stared at Kitty. She did not speak, but her eyes asked the question: "Well, what d'you want? I'm in a hurry."

She was one of those unfortunate creatures who are always full of haste, chasing their own little bobs of hair. Kitty said: "Good morning! Are you Miss Ives? I have an order to view."

She produced the order, and Miss Ives looked at it as though she had in her red and skinny finger a doubtful cheque.

"It's very early. The beds——!"

"O, never mind. I shan't mind. If you are busy—perhaps I can look round?"

As if a woman of Miss Ives's propriety would let you poke about her house—alone!

"If you will sit down for five minutes—please."

"Supposing I look at the garden—till you are ready?"

"O, the garden! If you wish to."

With agitation and fluster and worried ill-humour, she almost pushed Kitty down a tile-paved passage into the garden. She slammed the garden door, though time is not economized by the slamming of doors. She had said something about having lodgers to cook for. And Kitty walked down to the river, and turned to stand and stare. Enlightened staring is a necessity, and to do it you must stand very still.

Yes, she liked the little funny old place; she had liked it from the first glance; she continued to like it in spite of that feather broom of a woman. But mere liking was not sufficient; she had to examine it with one eye on its business possibilities, and the other eye on Alex. The garden was an untidy stretch of grass, with here and there

an old fruit tree, or a weed patch that had been a flower-bed. On pacing it out she found it to possess a river frontage of some hundred and twenty feet. Her measurements stopped at a laurel hedge, until she realizd that the ground beyond the hedge also belonged to Vine Cottage. She traversed a gap in the hedge and made a discovery.

She was looking up towards the other limb of the L shaped cottage, and towards a ground-floor window, a wonderful window, spacious and strangely peaceful. It seemed to stretch from wall to wall. It gazed with steadfast tranquillity at the river, and the trees and fields across the river; it looked along this little secret strip of garden between the laurel hedge and a high old red-brick wall. She walked up to the window and looked at it. The present furnishings of the room or its purpose did not matter.

She drew her breath and held it.

"Just the room for him."

It was. She could see him lying in that nappy window, or in the piece of garden, sheltered, but not too much so. He would have his trees and his river. And if this room had a garden door of its own?

It had one. She found a green door opening upon a narrow brick path. She smiled and returned to the river; she looked up and down the river with eyes of imagination; she saw boats coming and going. She saw also a rotting landing-stage with two broken boards on it. She strolled along and looked over the fence dividing the garden from Bunt's boat-house and yard. It looked derelict. She had both her eyes and her imagination on the big white boat-house with its tarred roof. Already she was wanting that boat-house, and wondering if Bunt was a person, a live entity to be bargained with.

She returned to the cottage, and walked round it, looking at the gutters and pipes and the putty in the windows. She was staring hard at a cracked pane of glass when a pair of red knuckles rapped on the window. She saw Miss Ives's hurried face, with its hair slipping back.

"I'm ready for you now."

Kitty went in.

The interior of the cottage was full of Miss Ives, and Miss Ives's sister, and Miss Ives's two lodgers and their various hastes and untidinesses, for Miss Ives appeared to have infected the whole place with the muddled disorder of a hurried soul. There were fussinesses, an impression of dishevelled things bundled hastily into drawers and cupboards. The prevailing tints of the paint and papers were heavy green and brown, gloomy colours, toning with the faint smell of cabbage boiling in the kitchen.

Miss Ives stood in the centre of what was called the drawing-room, and with clasped yet fidgety hands snapped out the necessary details.

"Three sitting-rooms, four bedrooms, kitchen, scullery and offices. Company's water, gas, electric light. Shop, —and stock. We want £1,150 for the cottage, and £150 for the stock—and goodwill."

Kitty was looking at the green wallpaper, a sort of tapestry affair with brown and purple splodges upon it. She herself—from a cursory glance, would have valued Miss Ives's stock at twopence-halfpenny, and Miss Ives's goodwill at nothing.

She said: "Is there a bathroom?"

No, there was no bathroom, and Miss Ives fidgeted, and held the door open.

"You would like to see—everything, I suppose?"

"Yes, everything. But—first—that room with the big window."

Miss Ives led her to that room, informing Kitty as she went—and jerking her words out between prominent teeth—that her lodgers used that room, that they were untidy young men, that they would push the chairs about and wear holes in the carpet. Kitty, forgetting Miss Ives for the moment stood by the broad window, and let herself feel what she wanted to feel. The little house was unhappy and it could be so happy. It seemed to cry out to her—"O, take her away, do take her away. She's always pinching me, me and pulling my hair, and slamming doors, and giving me boiled cabbage. I'm a happy little house, really." And Kitty mused. She saw the walls stripped, and the painted gloom burnt away, and creams and buffs and roses lighting and warming the interior. She liked the long room

with the window. She could see other things in it, and Alex.

"Now the bedrooms—please, and the kitchen."

She saw them, though Miss Ives behaved as though she was exposing some part of her own nakedness to a very young doctor; but Kitty did not pity Miss Ives.

"Of course—it's absurdly cheap—at the price we are asking."

Kitty maintained her solid reserve. Silence bears heavily upon a chatterer. And business is business. She saw the bedrooms, and the kitchen, and another Miss Ives who looked even larger and more faded than her sister. Even in the pulling on of a glove pressure can be exerted. Kitty showed no eagerness; she was impartial and calm.

"I don't think I need see the stock in the shop. I have several places to choose from. It's a nice little place—in its way—but then——"

She began her departure.

"Have you any local agents here?"

Miss Ives snapped at her.

"Tutt & Crewdson, in the High Street."

"Thank you. I'm afraid I've taken up a lot of your time. Good morning."

She left Miss Ives under the impression that she had no intention of buying.

But Kitty went to Messrs. Tutt & Crewdson. She saw Mr. Crewdson, a busy well-oiled little man with a bald head and a shoehorn nose. She was admitted to an inner office. She was deliberate and at her ease.

"I have been looking at Vine Cottage. I had the address from your London representatives. The price is too high."

Mr. Crewdson soaped his hands.

"Well—of course—madam—if that is your view——"

"It is. And the stock—is shop-soiled and stale. The whole place would need doing up."

"Little properties like Vine Cottage," said Mr. Crewdson—and was interrupted.

"It's a derelict business. I want a live one. But—I might consider—yes, in spite of the disadvantages. I want someone else to see it. We are looking at a number

of places. Supposing you give me the first refusal—for three days."

Mr. Crewdson hemmed and ha'ed a little, and tried a few exaggerations and inexactitudes, and then decided that it might be done. Kitty gave her name and address, and a reference to her solicitors and her bankers—who—of course—were also Mrs. Sarah's bankers.

"You can wire me—if any other offer arrives. Meanwhile—I shall be looking round——"

Mr. Crewdson conducted her to the door. He had susceptibilities, and they had fallen to Kitty.

"I hope we shall do business, madam. Good morning."

On the following day Mrs. Sarah came down to Shelford with her daughter, a Mrs. Sarah who was finding a renewed youth in combat. For if the other woman had erected a fortress, she—Mrs. Sarah—was now ready to offer a broad back to her daughter for the scaling and spoiling of that fortress. For as she said to Kitty in the train—"Fighting's always been my line, poppet. If it is to be a question of money—well, well, I talked about a thousand. I'll go to three, and further—if needs be. I shall keep on the shop. No Highbury for me—yet. Besides, now that Corah is going to marry a fellow who can make fifteen hundred a year or more—I can put on airs. I've more margin. I shall have to get hold of two good girls for the shop——"

They came to Shelford by train, Shelford being on a branch line from Weybridge. They did not propose to interview Miss Ives; not a bit of it; that would not do.

"Softly—walkee, my dear."

They managed to hire a boat at the ferry steps, and were rowed up and down the Shelford river-front like a couple of Amazons reconnoitring before a landing. They observed things, but did not discuss their observations before the boatman.

Said Mrs. Sarah, when they were again on shore, and walking up the lane:

"Quite right, Kittums, there's not another possible site on the Shelford front—but that boat-house. You ought to have that boat-house. We must find out about this man Bunt."

They discovered a carpenter repairing a gate, who

was able to tell them about Bunt. Bunt was dead, and his business had died before him. Mrs. Bunt lived in Cherry Lane at a place called Prospect Cottage—second on the left—after you had passed the church. It was Mrs. Sarah who sought out and interviewed the widow, and finding her an approachable person, opened overtures. Mrs. Bunt confessed that she had thought of selling the land and the boat-house; one or two people had been nibbling. She said that she had been advised to ask £300 for it. Yes, freehold—of course. And what did Mrs. Sarah want it for?

Mrs. Sarah had her answer ready. She said that she was looking for a nice site where she might be able to build a bungalow for a married daughter whose husband had been badly wounded in the war. Mrs. Bunt was sympathetic, but she stuck to her £300. Morover, she would like to be advised.

Mr. Frampton—a solicitor—in the Abbot's Close—looked after her affairs for her.

Mrs. Sarah attacked.

"Well—come and see your lawyer."

She believed in snatching her chestnut while it was hot, and she was so successful with her fingers that before the day was out she had agreed to buy and Mrs. Bunt to sell that piece of freehold land with all buildings erected upon it, for the sum of £300.

She and Kitty had tea at the Ship Inn. These two strong little women had walked all over Shelford, and exhausted Shelford, but not themselves. Mrs. Sarah ordered buttered toast, and looking greatly cheerful, reviewed the situation. They had the room to themselves.

"We have got a cinch on them, my dear, as the Yanks say. We'll offer a thousand for Vine Cottage and £50 for the stock! They are asking £1,300. It's not worth that. If they kick we can say 'Right, we have bought the ground next door. We can build—if we want to. Meanwhile—there is our offer of £1,050.'"

"I don't want to be hard on the woman," said Kitty.

"Don't pity your neighbour, my dear, so long as he has a fence to stand behind. Meanwhile——"

She ate buttered toast.

"You have a head and an eye, poppet. That's the only possible place on the Shelford river-front. And nearly two hundred yards of frontage. Why, even if the adventure weren't to come off, we have got our value. And more than that. In two years—I'll swear—we could sell at a good profit. You'll have a monopoly. The thing is to be ahead of the others."

Kitty stirred her tea.

"What about this place? Possible rivals."

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Sarah. "Did you see the man who runs it?"

"The man with the red face?"

"Just so," said her mother. "A boozer. That takes fifty per cent. off him. Besides—look at the crockery—and those curtains."

It turned out as Mrs. Sarah had expected. Miss Ives was offered £1,050, though Messrs. Tutt & Crewdson received the offer with hauteur, but after three days of negotiation, Mrs. Sarah's figures were accepted, for she had been able to say: "Well, there you are. That's our offer. We have the land, and personally I'm in favour of building, so it is not particularly important to us. There's our offer. We will let it stand for three days." Miss Ives, too flurried a person to deal with Mrs. Sarah's phlegm, and quite sure that if a house was built next door the value of Vine Cottage would be depreciated, and afraid of losing what appeared to be a certainty, and not being very stoutly encouraged by Messrs. Tutt & Crewdson, who were thinking of their commission and standing in with the people who appeared to have money to spend, —Miss Ives gave in, on the understanding that she was to be allowed to occupy Vine Cottage for a month—rent free. So it was all written down—"Occupation on Februrary 14th."

Kitty was just a little sorry for Miss Ives, Mrs. Sarah not at all so. She described Miss Ives as a woman who had never been able to make herself or any man comfortable, a chair with the springs sticking through the cushions. "Not enough padding, my dear. If I were a man I'd have nothing to do with a bony woman."

Meanwhile, Kitty sat down at the Vernor Street table, and did much scribbling of figures. She had her cottage

and her land, but that was only the beginning of things. She had to think of painting and decorating, and furnishing, and the restocking of the shop, and what she was going to do with Bunt's boat-house, and how she was going to do it. She would need chairs and tables and crockery, a new landing-stage, a super-gramophone, floorboarding, bunting, Chinese lanterns, treillage. The garden would have to be made gay and sleek and attractive. Also, she would have to live, and perhaps to help a paralyzed husband. She would need a strong girl in the house. It was probable—too—that she might have to hire a handy man to look after the garden and the fittings, to handle boats, and make himself generally useful.

She prepared a number of estimates and budgets. She travelled down to Shelford and interviewed local decorators and a local builder. She found the local builder a difficult person. He wanted to ask her £95 for adapting Bunt's boat-house for the purpose that she required.

She and Mrs. Sarah sat down to the figures.

"Don't niggle, my dear," said the mother. "It is better to be a little broad in the beam."

It was Mrs. Sarah who suggested a £500 mortgage on Vine Cottage. The property had cost them £1,350. There would be the lawyer's fees, etc. £300 could be set aside for decoration, constructional alterations, and new fitments.

"Call it £1,700—all told. A £500 mortgage will reduce it to £1,200. I'll stock the shop for you from here. Supposing I lay out £1,500, that will leave you with £300 to live on and work with for the first year, not counting the interest on your Cobbold shares. They may turn up trumps. Now what can you live on?"

"Fifteen shillings a week," said Kitty promptly.

"There may be three of you. Call it £3 a week. Say £150 a year. You will want a man for the summer months, say £2 a week for twenty weeks. He'll get tips. Six per cent. on a £500 mortgage—£30. That makes £220 in all. Then there will be coal and gas and electric light, and rates—about £15 a year, I think they said; and clothes and sundries, and insurance. And one has to remember the doctor. It will be a bit of a squeeze."

"O—I can stand it," said Kitty, "I'm going to work like a little horse. I can make a lot of things myself. Most of the cakes. This is my—job."

"Heavens!" said Mrs. Sarah suddenly, "we have forgotten the furniture. Well, you can have your bedroom furniture. I must put my £1,500 up to £1,600. Seems to me we had better be going to sales. I have a nose for a bargain."

CHAPTER XIX

I

ALWAYS there were flowers in Alex St. George's room, violets, narcissi, pots of red and white hyacinths, and the perfume of them pervaded his mother's purpose. These innocent things brought into that sealed room a gentle sense of languor. They smelt of the hot-house and the florist's shop, and never having known the sharp blue naked sky and the winds, they seemed to the man in the bed artificial and sapless, waxen things, like himself, shut up behind glass. Their language was not of the woods and the fields.

Somehow they made him sad, sadder than he need have been, sadder than he was. They, too, were paralyzed things, planted in pots or thrust into vases. His room was heavy with the scent of them, but he grew used to that, and did not notice it, but Leaper, stealing in first thing in the morning, would twitch his nostrils.

"Smells like a funeral."

For to Mrs. St. George's son those January days were full of a tired melancholy, and the new-born year was like a grey sea sleeping. He saw the rain come down; he knew the outline of every plane-tree that was visible, the shape and the number of the chimney-pots that could be seen and counted from where he lay. There were red chimney-pots and clay-coloured chimney-pots, and galvanized tubes and funnels, and chimney-pots with cowls that swung to and fro when the wind blew, looking like the helmets of faceless ghost-soldiers. He knew everything in the room—the cracks in the plaster of the ceiling, the way the shadows crept across the wall when the

winter sun was shining. There seemed to be nothing else for him to know, nothing more than he could know.

It was a grey and quiet month, and he lay in the grey trough of a depression, sunk so deep in it that it seemed to be all his world. Certainly, things happened, but they always happened in the same way and at the same time. There were the comings and goings of his mother, Leaper, and Dr. Dazely. He liked Leaper and he hated him; he was so dependent on Leaper, but sometimes when Leaper was massaging his legs he would feel a sudden uncontrollable desire to pick up something and dash it against that flat and baldish head. He knew the very smell of Leaper, a moist odour, and associated other smells with him, the scent of shaving soap and bay-rum, the smell of his sponge. There were times when the very nearness of Leaper made him conscious of a sense of nausea. He wanted to open the windows wide, but he could not get near a window.

There were nights, too, when he had dreams, horrible and repulsive dreams, and he would wake sweating and shivering.

As for his mother, she came in and out, and brought him things, and arranged flowers, and sat and gazed with those blue eyes of hers until he could have cried out to her—"Don't—don't," or have hidden his face in his pillow. He was most strangely afraid of his mother. She made him think of a priestess gliding noiselessly into some holy of holies, and arranging flowers round an altar. She made him think of a white and windless flame burning, a flame that would never go out. When he talked to her it was with a sense of effort, as though the silence of the room was glass, and he was picking up a hammer and cracking it.

Sometimes he would ask for the windows to be opened more widely.

"I'd like to hear the noise of the traffic."

But she had such a watchful look. It was as though she was watching for something in him to bleed to death. He was conscious of the heavy and perfumed presence of her kindness. She was overlaying her child, stifling a part of its life, smothering a whispering desire.

Yes, she smothered him with kindness. She gave him

everything that it was possible for her to give him, everything save life, and movement and joy. He could not complain; he could not show ingratitude; he was becoming wax in her hands, or a piece of soft pulp. He knew it, and yet could not struggle. He lay and consented.

She would turn on the gramophone, and when he wept over one of the tunes, she—with a sudden look of stark severity—stopped the machine, and came and stood beside his bed.

"My dear, you must not give way——."

Did she know that he was bored, so bored that he wished himself dead?

Yes, certainly things happened. Though her son could not walk, he could be provided with new clothes, and Tylor's of Savile Row sent their representative with a selection of patterns and a tape-measure and a sympathetic manner. Alex lay and fingered the patterns, thinking—"What is the use?" The pomp of youth had passed from his life—that—and Kitty. He had become a wilful pessimist with regard to his wife, repressing the instinctive surge of faith in her that rose in him from time to time, for like some experience thrust down into his subconsciousness an elemental faith in her survived. When the boxes of shirts and ties and pyjamas and collars and a selection of silk dressing-gowns were sent from Maybury's in New Bond Street, he made a languid examination of the merchandise, and remembered with a pang how he had bought pyjamas before going down to Maleham. Green, wistful Maleham, would he see it again? Did he wish to see it again?

But he had begun to loathe his bed. He appealed to Dr. Dazely, that bland and kind collusionist.

"Can't I get out of this—and have a chair by the window?"

Dr. Dazely polished his monocle with a cream silk handkerchief.

"Would you like to sit by the window?"

What a fool question!

But Dr. Dazely was no fool, nor was he a complete Agag. You could not come daily to sit by Alex St. George's bed without developing a liking for the lad, a feeling for that something in his wide eyes, and

Dr. Dazely was not satisfied. He spoke of Alex with sententious solicitude to Mrs. St. George.

"He ought to be interested as much as possible."

She asked him, with convincing frankness, to tell her what she could do that she had not already done. And he bowed to her.

"You have been a wonderful mother, quite wonderful. My advice has been—'Perfect rest, physical and mental.' But the time will come when he will need stimulus. He must be roused—little by little. He will have to be helped to adapt——"

She listened like the perfect mother.

"Of course. What do you advise?"

"I think we might begin by letting him have a long chair by the window."

"Yes."

"Later, we can promote him to an invalid's chair so that he can move himself about the room. When the spring comes I suggest that you take him down to some quiet place by the sea, or into the country, where he can be wheeled out—or trundle himself about."

She agreed. She was beginning to think that she had shaken off those Vernor Street women, and that Alex at Cromer or Torquay would be as securely hers as Alex shut up in Cardigan Square.

"Anything else that you can suggest?"

"Interests—you know—hobbies—compatible with his condition. He must be persuaded to develop interests. Just at present—of course—I do not advise too much mental strain. But so perfect a mother——"

She smiled upon her bland adviser.

"Music—for instance. He has the hands of a pianist——"

"Splendid. The very thing. Even a banjo. And he might interest himself in languages—though just at present I should advise banjo lessons, or the collecting of foreign stamps. If my language is somewhat figurative—dear lady."

"Admirably put," said she. "I realize the necessity for gradualness. He has to collect a new body of interests."

"And you will help him. Who could do it better?"

He departed, feeling warm within, pulling on his yellow gloves, the discreet and fashionable physican. But he would have done better if he had thought more of giving "the poor lad" a new pair of legs instead of a re-educated and bottle-fed soul.

II

There were people who spoke of Mrs. St. George's "beautiful devotion." They agreed to discover in her new sympathies, delicacies, softnesses. They admired her courage and her pride, and especially the complete silence that she had cast over her son's domestic tragedy. For she had let it be understood that there had been a tragedy, one of those unfortunate war-entanglements, but that she had no intention of discussing it with anybody. She was loyal to her son. In the opinion of her relatives she had behaved as a Smythe and a gentlewoman, for all the Smythes were to be found in the same family pew.

A very unsubtle rendering of this particular study! Old Jermyn St. George, trumpeting in his coarse way through the brass of the conventions, was like an elephant squirting water over irreproachable linen.

"Call it devotion! Bosh! She's just a white cat with her mouse."

Perhaps she was, and a cat complacently sure of her own rightness. We are adepts at self-persuasion, some of us more so than others, and Mrs. St. George had ceased to need self-persuasion. She was not a woman who lit candles and then blew them out again. With success well alight, shadows flee, and the path becomes clearer. She was confident with a gliding, beneficent, inexorable confidence. She had snatched her son from the jaws of a mésalliance, and if she had to carry him in her own jaws in the doing of it was that cruelty?

To do her justice she had never thought of it as cruelty.

She was fulfilling a function, enthroning a responsibility. Any qualms that she may have suffered in the beginning disappeared, and lingered as vague and unpleasant memories that were attached to those Vernor Street women. The taint—if there was a taint—was theirs. She had been able to rid herself of any self-accusation by dumping it upon Mrs. Sarah's doorstep. She had done it very thoroughly. By the end of January she was qualmless.

In possessing her son, in subjecting him to a complete and enervating luxury, in treating him like a pet dog, she did not seem to realize that she was making him something less than a man. She was giving him both Sybaris and Croton. Even when providing him with artificial interests she was suggesting that he should learn a few tricks and grin and gibber over them. And all the while she was committing murder. She ignored the very essence of his manhood, the urge of nature, the truth that a man must get things for himself or sicken and die, and that if things are got for him vicariously he will cease to desire them. The spirit of northern manhood is the spirit of striving.

Even when his long chair was placed on wooden blocks in the window, and Leaper lifted him from the bed to the chair, his mother would sit for hours at the window, sharing the life of the square with him. He was not to see it alone and by himself; he was to see nothing of his own. She seemed to distrust the things he might see unless she saw them also, even the yellow crocuses in the grass of the gardens, the swelling of the leaf-buds, the lilacs glimmering in the sunlight, the taxis, the people, the very sparrows.

She noticed that he was growing very silent. He would lie for an hour without speaking, staring with vague eyes at everything and nothing. Books had ceased to interest him. And sometimes she would talk in order to make him talk, though they said nothing to each other that mattered. She considered that it was good for him to talk, as it was good for him to have banjo lessons and twang strings. Mrs. St. George twanged strings.

III

One, Mr. Sidney Mocato, a gentleman with a tinge of yellow in his skin, and large and staring eyes, came daily to give Mr. St. George banjo lessons. They made so cheerful a noise together that Leaper felt moved to walk upon his toes and snap his fingers, though his business was to wait outside the door and listen to any conversation that might pass between Mr. Mocato and his pupil, for Leaper had had it impressed upon him that the women at Vernor Street were not to be forgotten.

But these banjo lessons were a mere crackling of thorns under a pot. They relieved the tedium and gave some sense of stir to the stagnant hours. Yet they had an unexpected and unexplained effect upon Alex St. George, for after them he would show a peculiar irritability, as though Mr. Mocato's fingers had been picking at his nerves. His irritability would spend itself on Leaper; more and more he was beginning to dislike the male nurse, and to feel a prickling of the skin when the man touched him.

As it happened Leaper had a pair of new boots that squeaked.

"For God's sake—take those boots off, man."

"Why, sir? What's wrong, sir?"

"They squeak."

"Do they, sir?"

"What! Haven't you noticed it?"

No, Leaper had not noticed it. He had developed a professional insensibility, and having done the same things for years, he had been dulled to the reactions his activities might produce in the persons upon whom he exercised them. A case was a case; moods were moods. It might have astonished him to know that there were parts of him, tricks of his, that roused in Alex St. George a sensitive disgust. Leaper had hair growing in his ears and nostrils; his skin had a greasiness; also, he had a habit of sniffing—— But chiefly Alex St. George loathed

Leaper's hands; he was so dependent on those hands, and he hated being touched by them. They had a clamminess——

Yet, though Leaper did not understand the inwardness of Mr. St. George's moods, he was aware of them as moods, and had the sense to warn his mother. When steam begins to escape from the safety-valve——

"I think he is a little tired of sticking in stamps, madam. If I may say so, madam, it would do him good to have a little company."

She had had this measure in her mind. That Leaper should have suggested it was an impertinence, but an impertinence that had to be borne, for Leaper had his uses, nor could he be discarded prematurely. Yes, no doubt it would do Alex good to see people, people who would amuse him, the right sort of people. She chose them with discretion. They were to brighten and emphasize the "atmosphere" she was collecting about her paralyzed son; they were to be of the right class and temper, such untarnished sunlight that the yellow fog of Vernor Street should be convinced of cheap gloom. For a woman of her position some of her thinking was very crude—"If I show him a pretty girl or two——" That is to say, she thought of her son's mind as a sort of stereoscopic cabinet into which you pushed pretty pictures.

She gave a series of little tea-parties, and having selected her pretty pictures, took them upstairs to show to Alex, whom Leaper had dressed in one of his Savile Row suits. She also introduced a selection of mothers, and one or two tame young men who had not taken part in the war. Yet these little causeries were not a success. The young things might sit about on the "club fender" and on odd chairs and tuffets, and smoke cigarettes, and turn on the gramophone, but Alex's wide eyes—with the sensitive swim of the dark pupils—saw something that his mother did not see.

"I'd rather they did not come, mater."

"My dear boy——!"

"You see—when they turn on the gramophone they want to dance. How can they—in my room!"

"You are too sensitive," she said. "You must make an effort—— I'm sure the little Hartley girl——"

"O—Maisie——!"

He looked profoundly bored—and more than bored.

"She sits and stares at me. I'm a hero. That's her pose. And I don't like the colour of her hair. I know she's a nice flapper——"

"My dear boy—I thought—— Is there anything that you want——?"

He flared—just as his father would have flared.

"Damn it—I want a new pair of legs—— Sorry, mater, but I get—so—so touchy lying here."

She was offended, but she had the sense not to tantalize him with further displays of youth.

"They tire me," he said; "I feel so infernally old."

So, still thinking of him as a stereoscopic cabinet into which you introduced pictorial matter, she set about choosing older and more faded pictures. She brought in one or two relatives when they happened to be in town, Uncle Sam, otherwise the Very Rev. Samuel Smythe, Archdeacon of Blandchurch, who was staying at the Langham, and old Havelock St. George, a major-general.

The Archdeacon was sandy, like his name, though why the name Samuel should be associated with sandiness requires some ethnological explanation. He came and sat beside his nephew's chair, and looked at him as he might have looked at a baby. "Now what am I to say to this——?" But he was a kind soul, if too thin-lipped, and having spent many years exercising archidiaconal functions, he was as careful as a cat. He walked round things softly, never brushing against a reality; realities are delicate china, and so disconcerting when smashed.

His philosophy was one of compensations. He loved that particular word. He soaped life with it, till it was all smooth and sudded.

"It might have been your eyesight, my dear boy."

And when the young man replied: "I rather wish it had been my head——" his uncle looked shocked.

"Come—come—we must not talk like that. Try and think of the compensations——"

He stated them full and at length, and with much kindness, till his sandy face seemed to swim before Alex's

eyes like that of the cat in "Alice in Wonderland." But what dreams—what a cobweb of words! Young St. George lay and gripped the arms of his invalid's chair, till even the grips seemed to slide away under his uncle's spume of words. But this sort of thing was not fair. When you had lost the use of of your legs and could not get up and run away, people came and stared and talked and preached until you were moved to use the old virile words of the war. "O, go to hell!" But how could you tell an archdeacon to go to hell? And if you sent him to heaven? Well, he might continue to talk of compensations.

Old General Sir George was more stimulating. He was somewhat deaf, and full of abrupt "What-whats." His very bright eyes looked out of his face that was red and contradictory. He had been an inspector or something during the war, one of those explosive men who when they saw that a certain structure had been made round, asked you why you had not made it square. He questioned Alex about his legs, and pinched them even. He seemed to disbelieve in their paralyzed state.

"Suppose you try to use 'em?"

"Well, you can't begin to try, uncle——"

"Good Lord—man—why not? They feel solid enough ——"

"I have massage and electricity."

"You do. Who's your doctor? I'll have a talk to your mother."

It is possible that this explosive person might have been of some use to Alex had Havelock not gone downstairs and quarrelled with Alex's mother. They disagreed, and the General could never digest any sort of disagreement. Moreover, he had spent a great part of his life interfering with other people's postures and plans and positions, and interference can be very distasteful to a woman who knows her own mind. Mrs. St. George was not going to have her son made square when she wanted him round, and Uncle Havelock was told that without sympathy and understanding a man is as nothing. But he gave her a flying shot—both barrels—as he went out of the room.

"If you keep him tucked up like that—he'll get into bad habits and take to nipping—— When a man's

bored—— Besides, you have cut him off from his woman."

Very coarse creatures—men, so obsessed by their appetites, and always imagining that the man across the table has just the same thirsts and passions. She shut out old Havelock—also the vulgar suggestion that her son might develop into something sottish and decadent. He would have neither the money nor the opportunity; she had him in a glass case.

Meanwhile, the one member of the family—old Jermyn St. George—who might have been of human use to Alex, was laid up at Torquay for the winter with what he called a "wet chest."

IV

Those who remember the spring of 1919 will recall the slush and the bitterness of its beginning, and its sudden and perfect flowering, but for young St. George the spring was not yet, thought he lay and thought of it with a little whisper of yearning. For how many men yearned for the coming of that first spring after the war, for a greenness that was unplastered with blood, and a singing of birds that did not tear at the heart-strings. So, Alex St. George lay and yearned for it, but with a languor of melancholy, and a desire that seemed to lie in a deep trench and wait for some flower to bend down and nod its head at him. For May would be the May of a year ago, and yet so different, with a pang in the heart of it. If he thought of fruit blossom and the yellow broom, and wild hyacinths blue sheeted in the beechwoods, he thought too of a woman. The spring was Kitty, and he could not bear to think of Kitty, for the thought of Kitty was most strangely disturbing. Strange—because he had a primeval faith in her instinct in the soil of him, and ready to burst through into the sunlight with the inevitableness of the spring. It lay there beneath his languor, beneath the dead leaves of a young pessimism. There were times when he would feel it stirring as the winds blew warmer.

It made him cry out; it turned him into a scribbler of verses, a young Solomon, a cryer up of vanities—vanities. He wrote from his bed and from his chair, looking out at the warm crocuses in the grass of the square. He thought of himself as a little Heine, a man for whom the roses of Shiraz would bloom no more.

Leaper took note of it. Mr. St. George was writing poetry, something that went "Dumpty-dumpty—dumpty—dum—Dumpty—dum—dum dumpty." Now, what did this mean? In the spring, a young man's fancy? —— Well, it seemed harmless enough, and it was poor —grizzling stuff, for Leaper continued to get a glimpse of some of it. It talked of grass and leaves that were dead even while they were green, and a cloud of gold that grew grey in the passing of five minutes. It asked if the roses were as red as the roses of yesterday. There was a something about a place called Maleham, a something with a tear in it.

Leaper stroked his chin—as he stroked it after shaving. He stroked Mr. St. George's chin in just the same way, and Mr. St. George could have bitten his clammy fingers.

"Treacly stuff."

But when a young man wrote of himself lying in a living grave, and of a dying soul in a dead body, ought not other people to be informed? The doctor—for instance? You had a right to observe things and to reflect upon how they might affect your own particular position. And Leaper, having extracted two or three sheets of very melancholy rhyming, showed them to Dr. Dazely.

"You may believe me or not, sir, but it's my opinion that it's time he went out of doors."

Dr. Dazely was so much of the same opinion that he consulted with Mrs. St. George, and Mrs. St. George's car was taken out of dock and a chauffeur engaged. The car was a limousine, and there was the problem of getting Alex into it. Something would have to be done, though it was not easy to get things done in the early months of 1919, but by means of bribery and persuasion Mrs. St. George did contrive to persuade a firm of coach-builders to prepare a plan and to undertake the necessary adaptations.

Also, it would appear that the Greenwood girl—Mrs. St. George always thought of Kitty as the Greenwood girl—had vanished from Vernor Street. Leaper still bought cigarettes there. He made guarded inquiries about the other little lady. He was told that she had gone to take up a situation in the country.

Mrs. St. George felt coldly triumphant.

CHAPTER XX

I

KITTY—of course—was at Shelford, and very busy effacing the memory of Miss Ives from the heart of Vine Cottage.

She began by lowering the blind of the shop and pinning a notice upon it—"This shop will be reopened later," but she did not say that it might differ from the shop of Miss Ives's days. Kitty was not attaching very great significance to the shop; it might be of use to her, and it might not; it might prove an infernal nuisance. Meanwhile, she set to work. It did not matter to her whether February blew and hailed or snowed. The river might look like ruffled lead, and Shelford as dead as a drowned water-vole. She gazed beyond the vicissitudes of the winter. She had her eyes on the days when the poplars would make a grey and pleasant shivering, and the grass would be green, and boats would come and go, and swans would float gracefully.

The furniture from her Vernor Street bedroom came down in a van, and she set up the bed in one of the bedrooms overlooking the river. She turned up her sleeves and got to work, but her labours were full of nicely calculated schemings. She had decided that the upper rooms could be left untouched for the time being, so far as paper and paint were concerned, but she attacked them with scrubbing-brush and bucket. But downstairs matters were very different. The long room with the big window, the passages and the parlour behind the shop were to be rose and cream. The rather greasy and dark little kitchen needed a new whiteness. She called in a

local decorator, a little bun-faced man with bright eyes a laconic fellow.

"I want this work doing at once."

He blinked and looked at her with a kind of depressing kindness.

"Easier said than done, miss. I've got three old men and two boys."

She told him just why she wanted the work done as speedily as possible, and the direct simplicity of her purpose was more potent than a week's wheedling.

"I have to make a home for my husband. He has come back from the war—paralyzed."

This was a good human argument, and Kitty's decorator rubbed his trousers, glanced at walls and doors with his bright eyes, and made calculations.

"There will have to be a lot of stripping. You see all this old stuff——"

She said: "Supposing I did the stripping? Not to shorten your job, but to save your old men's time."

He was looking at a cracked ceiling, but when she made this offer, he looked directly at her.

"You've got to get right down to the plaster. You'd want steps and a plank. It's a dirty job."

"No job's dirty when you are in earnest."

"That's so."

He meditated.

"I could lend you a plank and a couple of step-ladders, and a stripping-knife."

"That's very good of you," said she.

The step-ladders and a plank arrived next day in a hand-cart, and Kitty got to work. For three days she lived on tea and boiled eggs and sardines, and bread and jam. Each night she worked well into the small hours; she used up a number of candles, but she stripped the old papers from the two rooms, the passage and the kitchen. She made a bonfire of the debris in the garden. And when the lender of the step-ladders saw the result of her labours he nodded a hard round head.

"Hope the chaps back from the war will do as well. I've got the wall paper and the paint. I'll put my men in to-morrow."

They were quiet, decent old fellows, and steady workers, and while they used paste and paint-brushes and

stopping-knives, Kitty cut out and hemmed curtains. Mrs. Sarah had sent down a roll of green casement cloth that she had picked up as a bargain, and if ever a woman loved a bargain, it was Mrs. Sarah. She had much joy these days. Having engaged a girl to help Corah with the shop, she felt herself free to hunt bargains at all times and everywhere, and she hunted them from Hampstead to Croydon. Mr. Robert Parsons notified her of any sale that came within his ken, and so did various auctioneers and estate agents. There were parts of No. 7 Vernor Street that began to look all cluttered up like a dealer's shop, and Kitty's empty bedroom resembled a warehouse. And when she was not bargain hunting, Mrs. Sarah would go down to Shelford and trudge from the station with some monstrous parcel under her arm. Arriving hot and smiling and crinkling up her expressive nose, she would unpack all sorts of plunder, a bundle of table-knives, or electro-plated forks, towels, pillow-cases, a bedspread, a dozen tumblers, fire-irons, tablecloths, a set of enamelled saucepans, a cushion or two, and what not. Life still had an immense zest for her, life and all its accessories. She was as busy as a child helping to build a sand-castle, or a colonist erecting a blockhouse. Vine Cottage was both a nest and a fortress—Kitty's fortress.

Kitty, in a blue print frock, with her mop of honey-coloured hair like a halo of health and vigour, scrubbed paint and the interiors of cupboards, and stood on boxes to fasten up clips for the curtain rods, or ran downstairs periodically to see how her old men were getting on, or to make tea for them. She would come back to Mrs. Sarah with some of the flush of the rose-coloured wallpaper in her skin.

"It's beginning to look lovely. They have finished the long room."

"It's going to be a duck of a place, poppet. You will want a lot of tea-tables in the garden."

"I ought to be able to get a carpenter to make them. White tops and green legs."

"Yes, plenty of colour," said her mother, "plenty of colour. People will want it after four years of khaki. Wouldn't be a bad idea to get some of those big umbrellas —red and blue. And deck chairs. I must keep my eyes open for deck chairs."

So, Vine Cottage was full of pleasant noises, and human stirrings, and the old men working below heard the voices of the women who were busy above. "Makes you think of a couple of cats purring," said one whose white beard stuck out like the horn of a new moon. The little house took on a feeling of happiness, and Kitty grew happy in it with a sturdy and sanguine hopefulness. It did not make her feel strange to sleep there all alone. You heard the river running, and perhaps the wind in the trees, and all those queer little sounds that a house collects about itself. She had her particular happy moments in the day, and one of them was when she sat on a box in her bedroom and drank her tea, and watched a February sun-trailing a net of gold across the river. She was beginning to know the river and to love it, in its grey moods, and its frosty moods, and its mornings of mist when the trees seemed hung with vapour. She would look across at the level meadows and the willows and the poplars, and especially at a row of Lombardy poplars glistening like spires when the sunlight fell on them in a certain way. She was full of the sweet and secret joy of possession, the joy of a woman, of a bird in the building of a nest. It was not for nothing that she had the breast and shoulders and hips of a woman.

Another happy moment came when her old men had gone, and she could wander about downstairs quite alone with herself and her cottage. The flush of the new papers and the creaminess of the fresh paint spread from room to room, and, ignoring step-ladders and planks and trestle-tables and paint-pots, she would stand and visualize her rooms as they were to be. Particularly the long room, the room of her great expectations. She would sit on the window-sill with the river and the sunset behind her, looking—with her perfect skin—as fresh as the new paint, her eyes like two sloes, her chin thrust out. Yes, she wanted a camel-coloured carpet for this room. The bed should be over there. And in the daytime Alex should have a long chair by the window, and lie and look at the river and across it to those quiet meadows.

Sometimes—with a hand laid along one cheek, she would sit and wonder whether he would be happy here? Were men ever satisfied unless they were doing things playing games, or setting out to capture or kill some-

thing? Was there no adventure in the capturing to one's self? But to lie still and do nothing but read of what other people had done or were doing! Would he or any man be content with that? Would she want him to be content with it?

Her face would take on a white and brooding seriousness. She was an active little person; she was the daughter of Mrs. Sarah. She had experienced Alex's indolence; she knew that he could sit and stare. But was she going to let him sit and stare in the hypothetical and near future for which she was preparing? Men and children have to be kept amused. Yes, she might have to exercise patience, a dear and solicitous cunning. It is possible that she realized even in those days that Alex might have to be re-made—that he might be difficult. But then—the making of Alex and the making of a living man were the two halves of her apple. She was like a wise child with a doll from whose body the sawdust has been leaking, and a bleeding doll does not inspire a feeling of self-righteousness in your potential mother. Never would she be a prig in her attitude towards her husband.

II

Two days before her old men were due to leave her Kitty had to consider further matters, the near arrival of her furniture, and the state of the Vine Cottage garden.

Now the garden was to be the shop window, her picture-poster, and Kitty knew something of shop windows. With your shop window you had to catch and hold the eyes and the curiosity behind the eyes of the people who passed up and down your street. The river was to be Kitty's street. As she said to her mother—"I can't compete with Fred Karno, at least not yet—but I can get people looking. And after getting them to look I have got to get them to land." In brief, she wanted that garden to be gay and cheerful and alluring. She wanted it to be a live picture-poster, vivid and compelling. She was ready to let herself go considerably over that garden,

and even the big white boat-house next door. A garden implied a gardener. She spoke to her old men on the subject during their dinner-hour, when they sat on a plank in the shop and drank the tea she had warmed up for them.

They discussed it as matters of simple importance are discussed by men of their class, not for the doing of a favour but for the supplying of a need. The young men were beginning to come back to Shelford, but Kitty did not want a young man about the place, nor did her chorus of old men acclaim youth. And for once in a way they were right, for already the ex-soldier was showing himself to be in many cases a man who had lost the habit of work. Her chorus discussed possible individuals. There was Tom this and Fred that. It was he of the sickle beard who remembered Old George.

"Yes, Old George."

"He might be the man for you, miss. But he was always such a chap for chopping and changing."

They called him Old George Venables, though he was ten years younger than the youngest of them. He lived in Mill Lane. He had served for a year in a Labour Battalion in France. He was married, but had no children.

Kitty wanted to know more of George Venables. Why this fickleness, this "chopping and changing?" She was in search of a reliable man, not a leaf blowing about on a puddle.

"O—it's not in 'is 'abits, miss. He likes variety, does Old George, a bit o' this and a bit o' that."

"You mean—in his work?"

That was so. Old George was a quick-change artiste in the world of labour. As he of the sickle beard put it: "He'll do a bit of gardening one month, and then a job of rough painting. Next week you'll see him mending a fence. Summer-times he used to take on with Mr. Bunt next door as boatman. He could do a bit of boat-building, too. Variety. George is all for variety."

"Is he a steady man?"

"O, yes, steady enough."

The three old men exchanged glances. It appeared that Old George had a wife who was crippled with rheumatism. It had been a childless marriage, and as in many such marriages all the devotion had gone to one person. Old

George was devoted to his wife; she had been a fine strong woman, and now that she was crippled her man could not do enough for her. Yes, Old George was steadfast. It appeared to Kitty that the man with a passion for variety was held in peculiar affection by these other men.

He did not drink? Bless you—no! You never saw Old George inside a pub. All his spare money went to his wife; it had been spent upon doctors and quack medicines and magical gold rings warranted to cure rheumatism in a month. It appeared that at home he did a great deal of the house work, and most of the week's washing. "Won't let her put her hands in water, miss, or stand about hanging up the washin'." Also, he kept a piece of garden, and half a dozen hens, and a hutch of rabbits. Yes, Old George was a bit of a character.

She sent a message to Mr. Venables by the mouth of one of her old men, and at nine o'clock next morning Old George turned up at Vine Cottage. He stood about five feet seven; he had a straw-coloured and drooping moustache, downy hair on his cheeks, and a pair of clear blue eyes. They were extraordinarily honest eyes, and full of that rare English kindness. His face suggested to Kitty a blend of the walrus and the brown spaniel. The sleeves of his coat were patched at the elbows; he wore khaki trousers; he was meticulously clean.

She said to him: "I am wanting a man who can turn his hand to anything. I hear you can do most things. I can't afford to pay very high wages, but I'll pay you as much as I can, and more perhaps when I can afford it. I am making a home and trying to make a living—to keep my husband, who was badly hurt in the war."

He looked at her fixedly with his blue eyes. He was an inarticulate creature, as such men often are. His hands were more capable than his tongue.

"What sort of work, miss?"—for he, like her three old men—could not remember somehow to call her "ma'am."

She took him out into the garden.

"I want this little garden to be the brightest thing on the river anywhere between Staines and Shepperton. I'll tell you why. I am going to give teas and dances. I want to make people in boats stop here. So you see——"

He was very deliberate. His blue eyes seemed to take in this and that, and her and the river, and the hypo-

thetical boating-parties. Various he might be, but he had an eye for the practical; he could develop an enthusiasm for what was practical.

He said that there might be something in it, but where were her people going to dance?

She pointed to the big white boathouse.

"There——"

"But there's no floor to it."

"Exactly. That is where the practical man comes in. We have to put in a floor, and cut away some of the walls and put in trellis and bright curtains, and make it pretty."

"It would cost money."

"Of course. I'm not spoiling the job for the price of a pot of paint."

"Going to keep any boats?"

"I might keep two or three, and a punt or two."

"There's that other shed," said he; "I know Bunt's old place—inside out; let's go and have a look."

She had him interested. She had touched that which lay behind his dog-like eyes—an inherent hankering after variety, adventure, a certain boyishness that had never been satisfied. She had made a way for herself through the fence separating the two pieces of ground, and she had the key of the boat-house with her. She gave him the key.

"I don't want it talked about—yet."

He nodded.

"You'll hear enough gossip without startin' it. Lucky for you, miss, the house is on a brick standing, and good brickwork, too. I helped to mix the mortar—so I ought to know."

He unlocked one of the pair of double doors, and stood measuring the interior with his eyes. She left him alone for the moment. He rubbed his nose, and pushed his cap back, took out a knife and jabbed here and there at the timber framing. She saw the back of his neck wrinkle as he looked up at the roof.

"Cost a bit of money to floor this in, miss."

"I know."

"Straightforward job—though. Could do it—myself. You'd need a few brick pillars down the middle to carry the joists. You wanted the walls open in places, did you say?"

"Yes, for light. They could be filled in with trellis or curtains, couldn't they?"

"Easy."

He stroked his nose with finger and thumb, as though stroking it assisted the flow of ideas.

"But you'd have to shut 'em up in bad weather. Rain would drive in. Besides—if you let a gale of wind into a place like this—the roof might lift. Simple as pie—though. Use the wood you cut out for shutters."

"How much would the floor cost, Mr. Venables?"

"Timber's up. Have to get prices. You'd want good boards, too—tongued and grooved stuff—I reckon."

He reached the door and stood looking at a black shed that stood under the summer shade of three big chestnut-trees.

"You could keep a couple of boats and a punt in there. Needs a little pitching and tarring. And the river staging ain't exactly reassuring. But then—a bit at a time."

They stood looking at each other. He waited. She named the sum she was able to pay him, and then he made a suggestion.

"Suppose I were to put in full time, miss, till the place is shipshape. Afterwards you wouldn't be wanting me the whole week, perhaps."

"Week-ends—chiefly."

"That's so. I could do a bit here, and a bit somewhere else."

"As long as I'm sure of you, Mr. Venables, when I want you."

"You could be sure of that, miss."

She gave him her confidence from that moment, and she was wise in the giving of it, for in the days that followed Old George never let her down.

III

At the end of a March day that had seen the furniture carried into Vine Cottage by two vanmen assisted by Old George, Kitty was drawn to stand by the big window and watch the windy sunset blown about beyond the branches

of the poplars. She looked down across that strip of grass between the laurel hedges and the high red-brick wall, and its greenness—dipping into the ruffled silver of the river—seemed a pathway for her thoughts. The men had gone. They had been very patient men, careful of the new paint and paper, and obedient to the autocratic enthusiasms of the little thing in the blue linen dress. "No—farther this way, please. No—I think we will try it over there." Probably they had understood that there was something sacramental in the placing of individual pieces of furniture, and Mrs. Sarah, who was very much present, had given them beer money.

So, Vine Cottage was dressed and garnished, a nest lined and ready, and Kitty stood at the window and looked at the sunset over the river. Her little world was ready, but at the end of a happy day she had felt her little world's sudden emptiness. She had done so much and got so little. You might caress things with hands and glances, and yet they might remain an empty bed and an untrodden carpet, unalive, lacking their full significance. She was tired. From somewhere came the tapping of a hammer, the indefatigable mother tacking up a curtain valance in one of the bedrooms.

Kitty put her arms up over her head. She knelt down and pressed her firm little bosom against the low window-shelf. The red of the sky was changing to slate and purple; a blackness seemed to unfurl itself across the river. She heard a blackbird calling. And suddenly her mother came into the room and stood between the door and the bed, and for a moment neither woman moved.

Then Kitty said: "I'm—I'm glad I did not have a baby."

Her arms slipped down; her head seemed to droop a little.

"I haven't even begun—yet, mother. I haven't even——"

Mrs. Sarah's face became strangely distorted. She was still a very strong woman—in spite of her age—and she went and picked up her daughter. She carried her to the bed, and sitting down on it and making a lap, she nursed her child, and she nursed her with a kind of fierceness.

"Hold on tight, poppet, hold tight. Things come—when we want them—— Sure. Didn't I get what I wanted?"

Kitty clung to her.

"O—I'm tired—somehow. I seem to have been walking all day—and I haven't got any farther. How do I know——? It may be just a doll's house I'm playing with."

"It might be—my dear," said her mother, " if you were a doll. Which you're not."

CHAPTER XXI

I

On that same March day there were other storms. A north-east wind blowing a sky to tatters above the stately sequestrations of Cardigan Square made the plane-trees rock and the windows rattle. People lost their hats and chased them. Feminine figures seemed troubled concerning their shortening petticoats while young St. George lay at a window and watched them. He, too, was troubled. It was as though the north-east wind had blown a weight of rotting leaves away, and uncovered a corpse, but yet a thing that was not quite a corpse.

Though, in the sense that ennui is death, Clara St. George's son had come very near to death. The sweet, soft pulp of him had ceased to tremble even in verse. He had had a week of lethargy, of extreme stagnation. He had lain and stared, or fingered things as though he neither knew the use of them nor cared to use them. He had given Leaper no trouble. Almost it had begun to appear that Mrs. St. George had done her work so thoroughly and reduced the man in her son to such pulp that he was both cured and killed.

When Leaper carried up Mr. St. George's lunch, a nicely browned sole, a ham omelet, and a sponge custard, Mr. St. George looked consideringly at the soft stuff and refused it. Leaper had lifted the lids of the hot dishes.

"I don't want it. Take it away."

"Just try a little of this, sir."

He smiled, wheedling the child like a superior nurse, and next moment Mr. St. George had sworn at him.

"Damn you, take it away."

Leaper's jaw fell on its hinge.

"Sir——!"

"Why—the hell—don't you bring me up something to bite at, a good red steak? This pap——!"

"I'll tell the cook, sir."

"Do."

Leaper was thinking of his own dinner. If his patient chose to be peevish, well—Leaper had known patients far more peevish than Mr. St. George, patients who had had the dirty habits and the mischievous trickiness of monkeys. He was ordered to take away that toothless lunch, and to bring up a good crusty piece of bread and some Cheshire cheese. He was told to push both the bed-tables close to the chair, and to hand Mr. St. George his pair of field-glasses.

"Very well, sir," said Leaper.

Gentlemen had to be humoured, and if it amused Mr. St. George to use a pair of field-glasses to watch the sparrows in the square, and a cat out hunting, and the faces and the ankles of the girls and women who happened to pass across it, well and good.

Mrs. St. George was lunching with a friend at Claridge's. Her son ate his bread and cheese with the look of a man munching in prison. Leaper had noticed a wideness of Mr. St. George's eyes, a dark and dilated shadowiness of the pupils, as though the March wind had blown apart a pair of wavering curtains. And in very truth—it had.

For consciousness is a variable state, and especially so in sensitive people. It may narrow its field, or suddenly expand, reaching out beyond and above its utilitarian limits, and Alex St. George's consciousness had contracted under the pressure of monotony. A man may be so fatally bored that his attention to life may degenerate into mere vacant gazing. So, Alex would spend his hours watching sparrows busy over a gift of God, the droppings of a horse; or some prowling cat, or the smoke slanting fron the chimneys. He had lain sunk in a little pit of apathy. Nothing happened, nothing that mattered. And then had come this March wind, blustering, shouting, bursting doors open with the swing of its barbarian shoulders. It carried a whip—this wind—and it had

whipped him, made the crouching, staring man in him start up with a cry of anger and of pain. The world was alive. The spring was coming, coming with a March madness——

II

Leaper had finished his dinner, and was giving his blue serge suit a brush and a flick before going out for his daily walk, with a mongrel dog that he kept in a neighbouring mews, when he heard a crash in Mr. St. George's room. He stood listening, clothes-brush poised over his left shoulder. There was another crash, an echoing bump on the floor.

Leaper rushed up the stairs.

The electric table-lamp beside the bed toppled over—and smashed its globe upon the floor as Leaper threw the door open. He stood and stared, his lower jaw fallen like the hinged jaw of a ventriloquist's dummy. Mr. St. George was still throwing things, anything that he could lay his hands upon. His mouth was open as though to shout, but no sound came from it. His furious activity had a kind of dreadful silence.

Leaper found his own voice.

"Mr. St. George—sir——!"

He believed for the moment that his patient had gone mad. The cheese-plate, whirled like a discus, struck the mirror above the mantelpiece, starred and cracked it, and fell to smash upon the fire-irons. A book hit a picture fair and square and brought the glass splintering down. The gramophone lay overturned on the floor.

"Mr. St. George, sir—Mr. St. George——!"

He edged round the end of the bed, dodging a book that went by.

"Mr. St. George, sir, not that, sir, that's ink, sir."

But the ink-bottle, flying like Luther's shot at the devil, spent itself in a blue splodge upon the wall, and Leaper, dodging in, grabbed the cheese knife that was lying upon one of the tables. He had had his eye on that knife from the moment that he had entered the room. Meanwhile,

there was nothing more to throw, and Mr. St. George sat and panted, with a redness at the back of his widely dilated pupils. He began to shout; he was amazingly excited, voluble, almost incoherent. His hands gripped the arms of his chair; his hair looked all blown about as by a wind.

"Smashing things—what! Bloody fine show. By God—how I have wanted to smash things. I'd smash every damned thing in the house. You too—you——"

He went off into sudden laughter.

"Put the wind up you—grabbing that knife! You've got a front-line face. It's the March wind. Why, man—I believe—— What do I believe? You can't guess, can you? O, go to hell."

Leaper, having slipped the knife into his pocket, made soothing noises, and moved deprecating hands.

"That's all right, sir. You have had a real fine beano, sir. Smashed things. Splendid, sir!"

He found Mr. St. George's eyes fixed on him with a strange, flaring look.

"You don't know——"

"No, sir——"

The voice became a harsh cry.

"By God, man! get me out of this. I can't stand it—I can't stand any more of it——"

"Of course, sir—— Now just you lie down. The car will be ready to-morrow, sir. We'll get you out——"

Suddenly Mr. St. George collapsed, and lay back with closed eyes and hands that opened and closed with little jerks. His face went white. And Leaper, considerably scared, hurried out to the telephone on the landing, and rang up Dr. Dazely and Mrs. St. George.

III

Mrs. St. George was the first to arrive. She came in with her dish of ice, and very erect, to meet the emergency, her colour heightened by the wind. Her blue eyes stared.

"My dear boy—what is this?"

Leaper had touched nothing. My lady should see the wreckage and be properly impressed by it, for even Leaper had a dog's sympathy with another dog who was kept chained to his kennel; and she saw it all—the broken glass, the starred mirror, that explosive patch of ink upon the wall. But chiefly she was conscious of her son as an inert figure lying back in the cushioned chair by the window.

"My dear Alex——!"

Her voice protested. "Why? Why this absurd violence?"

"I was fed up with things."

She sat down. She said—"You must learn to control yourself," and became aware of his eyes looking at her momentarily with a veiled quietude which she took to be sulkiness. She sat there, and with an austere and correct kindness scolded him, and gave him a number of admirable reasons to prove that such behaviour was unjustified. He said never a word. He lay and looked out into the square. His silence appeared to accept her scoldings, and she saw in him no more than a sullen child, mute and unconfessedly ashamed of a rage-storm. She did not detect resistance in him, or appreciate the quality of his silence, or suspect that the soul of him was looking out at her from under drooping and sly eyelids. He was controlling himself. A new self-restraint had come to him after that outburst, and with it a new vision. Inwardly he had broken his chain. He had had a sudden startling glimpse of life out there. With eyes closed he had set his teeth and made a new profession of faith. His—"I believe" had come like the March wind. Yet—even without this belief, he could have said fiercely to his mother—"I don't care. I want life and I want her. I don't care what she has been. If she were a harlot—I should want her. She's alive. And I'm alive."

But he said nothing. He lay and clasped a new and secret exultation, a subtle sense of adventure. His attitude was that of a person who had realized that escape was both desirable and possible, and every fibre of his new aliveness tingled with opposition. But he opposed her with silence. It may be that he had begun to suspect and that his sudden and violent physical confession of

faith had torn his docility to tatters. He both believed and disbelieved. He was in silent and deep revolt. He was ready to conspire, but in secret.

He did not say that he was sorry.

"A man must smash things—sometimes."

His mother made it plain to him that she considered such barbarisms to be childish.

IV

Dr. Dazely put in an appearance an hour later. He saw, he heard, he questioned. He polished the situation as he would have polished his monocle with a silk handkerchief, and then looked through it like a polite and sympathetic family adviser. Obviously Mr. St. George had had an attack of hysteria—O, yes, hysteria was not a feminine monopoly. Also, it was a war product, a very real problem. The whole of Europe was just a little hysterical at the moment. Reaction, you know, after four years of tension and terror.

He said: "We must get him out. He wants movement, the wind on his face."

Mrs. St. George knew that the coach-builders had promised the car for to-morrow.

"Well—send him out—with Leaper. Not too far at first. And if you will excuse me——"

He aimed at diplomacy.

"Let him go—quite alone. People—yes—even the best of friends—yes, even you, dear lady, devoted as you are. Let him feel the wind—and movement. And then—perhaps—in a month's time—St. Leonards—or Bournemouth—or one of those little places on the Dorset coast."

Mrs. St. George accepted his suggestions.

V

The car was ready next day, and the first time for some four months Alex St. George emerged from No. 77

Cardigan Square, being carried downstairs in a carrying-chair by Leaper and the chauffeur. The coach-builders had so adapted the bodywork that a long door would allow an invalid to be lifted into the car, and laid on the seat with his legs supported upon cushions. Mrs. St. George attended. She carried a rug. It was she who tucked her son in. A speaking-tube had been fitted, and the flexible end of it with its mouthpiece hung clipped within reach of Alex's hand. She pointed it out to him.

"If you should feel tired——"

He nodded slightly.

"Thanks mater——"

She smiled and bent to kiss him.

"This is—quite—an adventure for you—I have told them not to go too far, nor too fast."

They set out, with Leaper beside the driver. They drove to Putney Bridge, and across it, and climbed the hill to Wimbledon Common. The March sky was all movement of masses of white cloud hurrying, of sudden sunlight and of sudden shadow. A wind was blowing; Alex could see the leafless branches swaying, and gorse bushes quaking, but he was shut away from the wind. He felt that he had but exchanged one glass case for another, and that this car was nothing more than a cabinet on wheels. The slim birch-trees were agitated as the trees and bushes are blown and shaken in a film. He was seeing life on the screen; he was not part of it. But—wait——! Somehow—he would manage to get the wind and the rain in his face. There had been no more storms. He had shown them all a deep docility. He looked at the back of Leaper's head with its colourless hair tending to curl over his coat collar. Damn the fellow! His hair needed cutting.

They pulled up on the Common. It was splashed with sunlight and shadow. Leaper came and opened a door and putting on his smile, was unctuously attentive.

"Not feeling tired, sir?"

"No."

"Warm enough, sir?"

"Quite."

"We thought we would be turning back, sir, now."

Mr. St. George nodded, and Leaper closed the door. The simile of the glass case on wheels was re-emphasized. Obviously, he was shut up in a cabinet, and Leaper was the curator. As they returned down Putney Hill it occurred to him to wonder what would happen were he to shout an order through the speaking-tube—"Drive me to Vernor Street." Almost, his right hand trembled towards the mouthpiece, but the impulse was restrained by a wisdom that was learning to wait. No, he had a better idea than that; he was not going to betray to them his March aliveness; he had been thinking things out; he had a letter in his mind, and he would keep it secreted in his mind until he could snatch his opportunity.

His mother met him as he was being carried into the house.

"Enjoyed it, my dear?"

He smiled upwards, and yet not directly at her.

"Rather."

VI

Mr. St. George's electric reading-lamp was out of order. It had suffered during the March storm, and though Leaper—who rather fancied himself as an electrician—had tinkered with it, the lamp refused to glow. There were reasons why it did not glow, but Leaper was left in the darkness. The light plug was close to the bed, and within reach of Mr. St. George's hands, and with a rubber tobacco pouch covering a hand that held a pair of nail scissors Mr. St. George had tampered with the plug.

An electrician was sent for. In 1919 no one hastened to work. The expected electrician did not arrive for three days. He appeared on the afternoon of the fourth day, a sulky young man, sharp nosed, with a face scarred with acne. Mrs. St. George was attending a committee-meeting; Leaper had gone for his afternoon walk.

A maid knocked at Mr. St. George's door.

"Yes—what is it?"

"A man to see to the electric light, sir."

Mr. St. George's eyes grew very alive in an interested face.

"O—send him in."

The electrician was admitted, wearing a hat. He had the 1919 mood upon him when a certain type of man set out to make himself vehemently awkward and uncomforting everywhere and on all possible occasions, a sulkily aggressive young man nursing a world's grievance. Alex gave him a "Good afternoon," and the electrician replied with a stare. He was all bristles. Here was a rich young rotter slacking in a long chair, one of the world's parasites, a creature nicely washed and tailored.

He put his black handbag on the bed.

"I think—it's the plug that's wrong."

The young man opened his bag.

"That's my job. You can leave it to me."

He extracted tools and laid them on the bed. He felt rude and he was rude. His very movements conveyed a jerky scorn.

Alex said: "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I'm paralyzed; I can't use my legs. I wonder if you would pass me that writing-pad."

The young man darted a sharp glance over his shoulder. He seemed to hesitate for a moment. The tip of his tongue came out and moistened his lips.

"Got servants—haven't you?"

"Yes—but I don't want to trouble them."

The electrician was looking for a bell. He moved across the room towards the fireplace. He slouched; he reached out a hand.

"Wait a moment," said the voice from the chair.

Alex saw the sharp, supercilious smile.

"If you can ring the bell for me you can chuck over that writing-pad. It's on that table. As one ex-soldier —to another——"

The man crossed to the table, and did as Alex had suggested. He chucked the writing-pad; it alighted with a smack on the bedtable beside the chair.

"I wasn't in the army. No such fool."

"Thank you," said Alex.

There was silence between them. Alex wrote a letter, while the electrician began to test the lamp, and then

to fiddle with the wall plug. He made occasional and scornful noises, but mostly he was silent, vehemently silent.

Presently he said: "What dashed sort of fool has been messin' about with this thing?"

The other's voice was cheerful.

"I have."

"You!"—and in the inflection added—"you would."

"I messed it up on purpose."

"O, did you."

"You're my lucky number—you know."

The electrician was on his knees. Curiosity gave to his face a sort of sharp and sinister smirk.

"I don't—think! What's on?"

"I want you to put a stamp on a letter and post it for me when you go out."

"Don't you own a stamp in a place like this?"

"I haven't a stamp, and I haven't any money—I'm not supposed to want any. I'm not supposed to do any work. Damn it, man, I'd give ten years of my life to be down on my knees like you are, fiddling with that thing."

The young man stared.

"Never did a day's work—I suppose——?"

"Look here," said Alex, leaning over the arm of the chair; "if you saw a man lying smashed up at the bottom of a hole, you'd help him. O—yes—you would. It wouldn't matter—— You'd just jump down without thinking. And you would be doing me a favour. I haven't the price of a stamp on me. I'm not going to offer you my fountain-pen or a packet of cigarettes. I dare say you might want to spit in my face. But—damn you—post this letter."

"Be damned to you—too," said the man, "but I will."

CHAPTER XXII

I

NEVER was a letter more strangely stamped and posted. It was delivered at No.7 Vernor Street next morning, and since Mrs. Sarah was breakfasting in bed, the letter was placed on her tray and carried up by the woman who came in to light fires, cook the breakfast and make the beds. The letter was addressed to Mrs. Alex St. George, and when Mrs. Sarah recognized the handwriting she seemed to break out into a sudden heat.

"When did this come?"

"First post."

Mrs. Sarah pushed the tray at the woman.

"Here, take this; put it on the chest of drawers. I must get up at once. I'll manage some breakfast while I'm dressing. And find me a taxi, will you, Florrie—there's a good woman."

"This hinstant?"

"Yes, he can wait."

In her comings and goings between the combining of a toilet and a breakfast, Mrs. Sarah found time to hurry out on to the landing and to call her elder daughter. She told a sleepy Corah the news, a Corah who came out of her room looking prettily dishevelled and excited.

"Not really?"

"I'm going straight down to Shelford. Not trusting it to the post. Besides"—and she gave one of her human smirks—"I want to know what's inside it. Simply bursting——"

She was at Shelford at half-past ten. She found a taxi outside the station, and climbing in with an air of solid haste, she gave the man the address. "Vine Cottage. Know it? I'm in a hurry." In fact, she sat erect on the seat, refusing to lean back against the cushions, a stout woman who had the appearance of being out of breath. On pulling up at Vine Cottage she told the man to wait. "May want you again. Anyway—I pay." She found the green front door unlocked and went in, calling to her daughter. They met in the passage. She seemed to push the letter at Kitty with both hands.

"Came this morning. Read it. I've got a taxi waiting if we should want it——"

Kitty looked at the letter. The flash of a sudden emotion seemed to withdraw itself into her eyes. She turned and walked back into the kitchen, and Mrs. Sarah did not follow her. In the kitchen Kitty had been busy lining the cupboard shelves with clean white paper, and the scissors lay on the table. She sat down at the table, with her elbows resting upon it; she held the envelope between her two hands and looked at it; she seemed to look at it a long while.

With a quick thrust of the right hand she reached for the scissors, slit the envelope, drew out the letter, read it, and when she had read it she sat for a time, staring. Her face, very white over the opening of the letter, regained its colour, and with it its warm creaminess and its bloom. The lips, pale from being pressed firmly together, ripened suddenly like red fruit.

Mrs. Sarah had betaken herself to the long room with the big window. With her philosophy of "Don't fuss" she understood the virtues of occasional solitude. She sat down on the bed and reproved it for its creakings. "What's—your—trouble? No need for—you—to feel flustered." There was no doubt as to her own agitation; it was absurd and it was splendid. She felt like a Dutch ketch full of cargo rolling in a heavy sea. She found a very clean handkerchief and wiped her face, and got up with an air of solid serenity and straightened a picture, though she could not decide after making the adjustment whether the thing really did hang straight. Her emotions were clamorous and crowded, emotions that had to be

smacked and told to sit still. What a long time the girl was——

Then she heard Kitty's voice.

"Mother."

Mrs. Sarah sailed down the passage to find Kitty closing the kitchen window and fastening the catch. The letter had disappeared, and the papers had been cleared away.

"He wants me. I'm just locking up."

She was solemn as fate, full of sudden practical preoccupations, and Mrs. Sarah had to button up all that emotion, and did it, and was proud of it, and proud of Kitty, too.

"A good thing I kept the taxi."

"Yes."

Kitty was locking the garden door.

"It's as I thought. He had none of my letters. They stopped his. He smuggled this one out by a man who came to see to the electric light."

She stood a moment, rapt, a woman with the words of a love-letter in her heart, and anger in her eyes.

"I'll never forgive her. I know what to do now. I'll go and pack my bag. Venables can keep an eye on the place. He's at work on the boat-house."

She went upstairs, leaving her mother sitting on a kitchen chair with the air of a solid rock emerging from the swell of a passing wave. Kitty meant business, and she was Mrs. Sarah's daughter. Mrs. St. George had better look to her defences.

"Now—I just wonder how she will do it?" thought Mrs. Sarah, immensely intrigued—"I just wonder! But she will do it. I'm glad I'm alive."

II

That afternoon it rained, but gently so, for the day had a moist tranquillity, dispersing moisture out of a dove-grey sky. The pavements and the roadway were darkened by the wetness, and the branches of the plane-trees

glistened. The grass in the gardens looked more green and though the crocuses lay prone in their paling shrouds, daffodils were spearing upwards. Sparrows chirped and fussed. Spring had put out a hand and drawn a curtain and let a breath of balminess into this London square where a man lay at a window and waited.

Mrs. St. George had remained at home. She had come to join her son and was sitting in an arm-chair before the fire, reading some pamphlet or other that was anti-this or anti-that. Her back was towards Alex. He could see the crown of her fair head rising like a pale sun above the blue horizon of the chair's back; he listened to her regular turning of the pages; he was so nervous and so tensely strung that he was afraid of infecting her with his nervousness. He wanted her there in that chair, anywhere but at a window. He felt that he would rage at her were she to get up and impose her interference upon the anguish of a secret suspense. He was terribly excited and keeping still. Almost he had been counting the minutes of daylight that were left to him. Would anything happen? He pretended to read and to watch the comings and goings in the square. His mother was a stranger interposing the menace of her presence between him and a possible freedom, a frost ready to fall, a female Pluto capable of dragging him back into the underworld. He knew now what an escape into the air and the sunlight would mean to him—joy, the joy of a wholesome living, of touching the live flesh. It would mean an escape from the house of a slow decadence, of desires slowly soiled by an insidious perversion, of habits twisted into deformity. Yes, escape from a scented, warmed, slimed existence when you lay abed with your own hot youth and felt the helplessness of it.

And out there—somewhere—was Kitty, a little live thing with arms and breasts and lips and a soul. He saw his salvation in her. She would protect him from a dreaded uncleanness even as she had covered his head and his fear with her arms. He was a man to be rescued, and he knew it.

But would she come? Had that sulky devil posted that letter? Did she care now? Could she forgive?

He had no god to whom he could pray, nothing to which he could hold save to the feet of that great grey figure of compassion, human and yet dim, shaping itself from the world's doubts and disillusionments and the dead bones of dead beliefs. For—if we cannot pity each other, then indeed is consciousness but a dung-heap in which maggots swarm.

But Kitty came. She appeared in Cardigan Square at about half-past three on that wet afternoon, a little figure in a dark blue rain coat, skirting the high iron railings of the garden. She carried an open umbrella. Immediately opposite the house she paused, and dipping her open umbrella, stood at gaze, her eyes searching the windows.

Alex gave one glance at the top of his mother's head. He leaned towards the window, and waved a hand. He was sure that the eyes in that distant face were fixed upon his window. He waved again, and she made a dipping movement with her umbrella. She nodded. To Alex her face was like a little glowing disc of very bright light.

He felt faint. The whole of him seemed to have passed suddenly out through his eyes. With his face close to the glass of the window he saw her raise her umbrella and move slowly away. Was she going and so soon? Or was there a method in her movement? He watched her disappear round the railings; he reached for his field-glasses. Mrs. St. George rustled the paper of her pamphlet.

He felt a sudden anger against his mother. Surely she was not going to get up and come to the window? He saw her head move; she bent and poked the fire, and sat poised for a moment, holding the poker. Then she put it down, and lay back in her chair. Alex breathed.

He was able to turn again to the window. His throat felt tight and dry, and he knew that he was trembling. He saw Kitty reappearing. She had circled the gardens. Her umbrella was up, and this time he noticed that she was carrying what appeared to be a large flat cardboard box done up in whitish-brown paper. He raised the field-glasses to discover that there were words hand-printed on the flat face of the parcel; he focussed

the glasses; he found that he could distinguish the words.

He was conscious of a burst of inward applause. The cleverness of it—the simplicity! This—was—Kitty. She paused over there, her umbrella screening her face. He read.

"No letters reached me till the last. Door shut—always. I wrote often. Same as ever. Just waited. Make sign if you can read. Here—below—to-night—about 6.30."

He reached for the tassel of the spring blind and managed to grasp it. He saw her umbrella lowered. He drew the blind sharply down, and let it slide up again. He did this twice. Her umbrella dipped twice in response.

Mrs. St. George made a sudden movement. She turned her head.

"What—are—you doing, Alex?"

He answered her with a note of gaiety.

"Seeing if the blind sticks, mater. It stuck yesterday Wish the rain would stop. You can't see anything but umbrellas."

III

There came into Alex St. George's mind a memory that recalled another instance of his mother's interference—a memory of a pretty housemaid named Rose and of himself—a boy of ten—romping together, and of his mother coming upon them suddenly like a cat surprising two young birds. He had never forgotten the look on his mother's face. He had been taken into her bedroom to be told that "Gentlemen did not romp with servants." He had had a feeling that his mother had been shocked, that something in her had been outraged; she had made him feel ashamed without his being able to understand his shame. And Rose had been snipped off with a pair of scissors and tossed out of the house.

He lay and looked at the top of his mother's head. He

discovered to his great surprise that he was less angered by his mother's lies than by his own acceptance of her lies. He had been nothing of a man. He had allowed her to treat his faith in Kitty as she had treated the girl Rose—to hustle it out of the house into the street. Yes, he thought that he understood it all now. She had felt outraged by his passion for Kitty. She had feared the sex in her son, and her natural impulse had been to take a whip to any woman who was dangerous. Her glances had whipped that rosy-faced housemaid. And had she had her way she would have whipped Kitty, and with contumely and clamour have driven her naked down Regent Street.

But—good God——!

He was immensely shocked. He found himself looking with curiosity and some fear at the top of his mother's head. What an outrage she had conceived, and how ruthlessly she had carried it out! She had treated him as something less than a child. She had hired people to lie to him. She had insulted him with Leaper. She had purloined his letters. It seemed incredible, but he knew it to be true.

His anger against Leaper was bitter, being reinforced by the smell of the man, and by the thought of his smiling, superior slyness. Faugh! To have been touched and handled by Leaper, fooled by Leaper, lied to by Leaper!

He lay very still.

He heard a movement on the landing. The clock had struck four. The door opened, and he heard Leaper's voice, and caught a glimpse of that hinged smile and of those pale and suborned blue eyes.

"Shall I bring up tea for two, madam?"

Mrs. St. George sat forward in her chair.

"Yes, for two, Leaper."

She gave the order with casual calmness; she rose; she walked to the other window. She seemed unaware of her son's silence, and of the vehemence of it, or of the deep humiliation he had discovered in her treachery. He lay with every sensitive outlet closed against her. He felt that he hated her.

Tea was brought in and the tray placed on the occasional table by the fire. Mrs. St. George returned

to the fire and sat down. She poured out her son's tea, and Leaper stood to carry it to him.

"Toast, sir?"

If ever the outraged child in a man conceived an impulse Alex St. George's impulse was to dash the cup of tea in Leaper's face. But he did nothing of the kind. He asked for a clean handkerchief; he wiped the rim of the cup and the spoon. He ate his buttered toast with an air of controlled disgust.

IV

Between tea and dinner they left him alone. He noticed that the rain had ceased, and that a soft, blurred light seemed to be spreading over the square. The upper sash of the window was open for an inch or two, and he made an attempt to raise the lower sash, and found that he could do it. He closed it again. He had some paper and a pencil on his table, and using a book as a pad he sat and wrote a letter, and when he had finished it he folded up the sheet and slipped it into the breast-pocket of his coat.

Leaper, coming in to turn on the lights, was told rather sharply to leave the room in darkness.

"Just as you please, sir."

He closed the door with a suave carefulness, and Mr. St. George lay back on his cushions, and watched the square hang out its network of lights. If life had a new mystery this London night might have as many meanings for him as there were lighted windows in Cardigan Square. Taxis came round-eyed out of the darkness to disappear into the darkness. He realized that he was afraid of his mother, more afraid of her than he had been as a child. He was so very conscious of his helpless legs. He was a prisoner, but a prisoner trembling at the thought of a possible escape, and his manhood clamoured for freedom. He had let himself become something less

than a man, and the coming of Kitty had made him both glad and ashamed. He had been deeply moved. His excitement—holding itself rigid and silent—was asking for action. He even thought of trying to drag himself out of the room and down the stairs, and out into the square. And how damnably absurd it all seemed.

He was waiting for a clock to strike the half-hour. He leaned over and placed his face close to the window, and though the square was none too well lit he felt sure that he could distinguish a figure waiting over there by the railings. A dish of fruit stood on the table, for he was fond of fruit, and liked to have it by him. He chose an orange. He took the letter from his pocket, wrapped it round the orange and tied up the whole in his handkerchief. Then he raised the lower sash of the window.

The figure over there detached itself from the railings. A taxi passed, and when it had disappeared round the square Alex jerked the orange out into the night. He heard it fall with a soft thud. Holding to the window-ledge he drew himself as close as possible to the window and was able to see a woman's figure dart across the road and stoop to pick up something. He heard a soft whistle.

V

Kitty carried her treasure round the square to a street lamp on the farther side of it. She unfastened the handkerchief, and unwrapping the sheet of paper, pushed orange and handkerchief into the pocket of her raincoat. The orange had been split by the fall, and had exuded some juice on to the sheet of paper. Taking out her husband's handkerchief, she dabbed it carefully. She smoothed out the creases. She found that she was able to read his letter.

"Kitty—dearest—I must speak to you. I can't write all that I have to say. I think I know everything now. Bless you for coming. I've felt horrible and glorious.

I must speak to you, get to you—somehow. I'm no better than a prisoner here. But they take me out in the car now. The day after to-morrow I'll ask them to drive me down to Ockham on the Guildford road. Do you happen to know the 'Swan' at Ockham? It stands all alone by a big pool. I'll get them to stop there. I'll send the men in for their tea, and have mine brought out to me. If you could manage to be there—— O, my dear, do try. I've been a weak, sick beast all these months——"

She looked up at the lamp, and then she pressed her cheek against the cold iron of the pillar. She felt just a little faint. Her chance had come.

CHAPTER XXIII

I

During the thirty-six hours that followed, Alex built and filled for himself a little Chamber of Horrors in which each figure was a fear. He had chosen a particular day, because he happened to know that Aunt Ermentrude was in town and that his mother was lunching with her; but at the last moment his mother might decide to drive with him. He was afraid of the car breaking down, of Kitty being unable to come, or of her missing the rendezvous. He spent his time and his temperament in chasing straws. At Ockham, Leaper and the chauffeur might fail to give him his opportunity. He might consider the bribing of Leaper—but what had he to bribe him with? Moreover, he so loathed the man that he detested the idea of compounding with him.

On the day of the drive his blind rose on a sunny morning. He was both glad and afraid. His mother might be tempted by the fine weather. She might give orders for the car to pick her up after lunch at Aunt Ermentrude's hotel, and assume her place beside him as though she was taking part in a procession. Her glances treated the features of a landscape as though its face was the face of a vast and anonymous proletarian crowd. She might remain beside him at Ockham while tea was carried out to the car. The anti-climax would be too maddening.

He passed a morning of abominable restlessness, and in assuming a casual apathy. Had he dared to, he would have fussed about his clothes, and his hair, and the particular tie that Leaper was to select for him. His appetite for life had become suddenly fierce and voracious.

He had been starved. At a quarter to one Mrs. St. George was driven off in the car. Supposing she kept it? His luncheon-tray arrived and he made one or two casual remarks to Leaper.

"We'll leave about two."

"Rather early, sir."

"Yes—but I want to go through Richmond Park. We'll have tea at Ockham."

He had no appetite for lunch. He finicked with it, being worried to death by his mother's taking of the car. He felt cut off, marooned. He watched the square, and when at last he saw the big blue car gliding round the curve of the gardens, and the chauffeur putting out a hand to indicate to other traffic that he was about to pull over to the off kerb, Alex felt hot and weak. His heart was thumping. The car was there. But had his mother given Sandys any orders? He dared not ask. He was still in doubt about it when the two men carried him downstairs, and lifted him into the car. He asked Sandys a jocular question, a perfectly foolish question.

"You don't mind stretcher-cases, Sandys?"

"Hope you won't be that always, sir."

"Suppose I ought to have a nurse in the empty seat?"

"Might do better, sir."

The door was closed, and as it closed Alex felt a little jar of relief and exultation. His mother was not coming, and he sang out to Sandys:

"Take me through Richmond Park."

The chauffeur raised an acknowledging hand.

In Oxford Street it seemed to Alex that the noise of the traffic sounded a triumphant note. The engine drummed. No doubt he would have found the pandemonium of Paris, and the devastating discords of Rome, splendidly stimulating after the muffled monotony of that overheated room, for his mother was a chilly mortal, and even when coal was rationed she liked her fire half up the chimney. He asked for noise, movement, the clash of cymbals, youth and its jazz band. They went down Park Lane. At Buckingham Gate the interweavings of the traffic, the red buses, the dark taxis, the coloured cars, filled him with wide-eyed delight. He glanced sideways at a policeman on point duty and loved him. Knightsbridge was a flowing river. He looked at the shops and

was thrilled, especially by those windows that were full of feminine provocations.

For he was going to see Kitty, to speak with Kitty, to touch Kitty. He was absorbed in the contemplation of Kitty as a woman, as a creature live and warm with lips and hands. He was approaching her as a lover, and in the sensuous mood of a man home on leave. He did not think of Kitty as a contriving, planning, purposeful intelligence, as a personality separate and individual, as a little Joan of France solidly upon the earth. To him she was just Kitty, woman to his man, soft flesh to be touched and worshipped. She was a bright object, fruit, flowers. Kitty, the wife, and her preoccupations and proposings were unforeseen. It was an April day, and he thought of her mouth and its kisses.

So, they drove him through Richmond Park, a fragment of old England where trees still gather green spaces about them, and man and deer may drink of other things, even of solitude. He made them pull up for five minutes, and Leaper got out and lit a cigarette, and looked about him with the disapproving air of the man who sleeps with his window shut, for to the Leapers solitude is a kind of sin. He came and stood beside Mr. St. George.

"Feeling comfortable, sir?"

"Quite."

The perfunctory question having been asked and answered, Leaper stood regarding the green spaces, and made a pointing movement with the stump of a cigarette.

"There ought to be 'ouses here. Waste of a good building site. Nice place for a garden city."

Mr. St. George seemed lost in a long stare.

"I think we'll be getting on."

With Kingston and Surbiton behind them they ran along the black stretch of the Portsmouth road, through Esher to Cobham, with the April sunlight hanging in the darkness of the pine-trees. They came to Wisley with its rusty heather and dead bracken and its Scotch firs. The sky was full of freedom and the drifting of clouds, but Alex was looking at neither the clouds nor the trees. He watched the road. It rose, descended again very gradually, swept past the opening of a by-road, and curving, showed water glimmering beyond the dark

trunks of the trees. The opening curve uncovered the redness of the Swan Hotel, with an open space between it and the pool, and half a dozen cars standing there. They pulled up outside the "Swan," Sandys backing the car off the road till the tail lamp was within a yard of a hedge.

Alex, all eyes, was looking for Kitty, a little figure half hidden somewhere on the edge of the water or among the trees. He scrutinized the cars. They were empty. Two or three chauffeurs were gossiping by the hotel doorway. A dusty-looking Ford van stood a little apart, its driver—wearing an old army greatcoat—leaning vacantly over the wheel. There was no sign of Kitty.

Leaper came to the door.

"Tea, sir?"

"Yes, bring me some out on a tray."

"Very well, sir."

"You and Sandys can go in and get tea in the hotel. Here's a ten-shilling note. There's no hurry."

"Thank you, sir. I'll have tea brought out first."

Mr. St. George was wondering whether Leaper had detected in him any signs of excitement. He was trembling on his cushions. He was afraid, afraid that his wife had failed him.

II

Leaper carried out Mr. St. George's tea, brown teapot, white cup and saucer, milk-jug and sugar-basin, three pieces of white bread and butter, and two slabs of cherry cake. He arranged the tray on Mr. St. George's knees.

"Comfortable, sir?"

"Quite. Go in and get your tea, Leaper. I shall be all right here for half an hour."

His excitement was intense. He watched Leaper disappear into the hotel before he attempted to pour out his tea, and when he did attempt it a tremulous hand slopped the tea into the white saucer. The moment had arrived; he was out of doors, alone, and unwatched. But where was Kitty? Would she appear suddenly, walking calmly towards him, pretending to be casual and surprised? Had this April day lips and a heart?

Yet nothing happened. He began to drink his tea and to eat his bread and butter, feeling himself on the edge of a childish desolation, of a horrible anti-climax. He had not noticed the Ford van drawn up close under some young Scotch firs about twenty yards away on his left. The driver in the khaki overcoat was getting down into the road. He went to the back of the van and opened the doors. A man emerged like a terrier backing out of a rabbit hole, straightened himself, and smiled with blue eyes above a flaxen brush of a moustache. A girl in a black hat and a dark blue raincoat followed him.

She went straight to the St. George car, the two men remaining where they were, watching her. She opened the door. She took the tray from Alex's knees, and placed it on the running-board close to the near front wing. She looked at her husband; she had a face of immense seriousness.

"I've come for you."

He was all eyes. He looked rather like a child to whom something surprising and wonderful was happening. He smiled and nodded. He said, "Kitty, we've got twenty minutes."

She possessed one of his hands and held it, while she waved to Old George and the driver of the van.

"I'm kidnapping you. I shan't need twenty minutes."

His eyes ceased to be the eyes of a child. He caught the spirit of adventure; he understood it, but in his own way and not as the woman in her he understood it.

"O, great——! What—what a jest!"

She gave him one quick stare of the eyes, a look in which an unasked question was unveiled, and then covered. His face was bright with excitement, hers white with the glow of her most serious endeavour.

"We'll lift you out," she said.

The two men came up, and between them they lifted Mr. St. George out of the car. A rug, caught in the transit, trailed on the road, and Kitty, pulling it free, tossed it back into the car. She had rugs of her own. Running to the van she looked back to make sure that no interference was developing; she climbed into the van, and turned to help the two men with her husband. There were two cushions, a rug, and some sacking on the floor of the van. They lifted Alex in heels first, and laid

laid him on the cushions. Kitty half knelt and half sat beside him. The driver closed the van doors, started the engine, ascended to his seat, and Old George climbed up beside him. The van swung out from under the trees, swerved to the left, and disappeared with its characteristic Ford song in the direction of Cobham.

Some fifteen minutes later Leaper strolled out, lighting a cigarette. He was close to the car before he noticed the absence of Mr. St. George, and the abandoned tea-tray balanced on the running-board. His lower jaw fell open with the cigarette adhering to the lower lip. He stared at the tray; he noticed that the cup was half full of tea, and that a slice of unfinished bread and butter remained on the plate.

"Good God—he's got up and walked!"

An equally astonished Sandys joined him in the contemplation of an apparent miracle.

"But if he has walked—where is he?"

Two chauffeurs were craning their heads under the bonnet of a car, and Leaper hailed them.

"Seen my young gentleman anywhere?"

No, they had not, and that was the most astonishing part of the affair. No one appeared to have observed Kitty in the act of kidnapping her husband.

III

Crouching beside him in that narrow space she felt the van gathering speed, but nothing but its utmost speed would satisfy her. She bent across and touched Old George.

"Tell him to drive—to drive like hell."

Alex was smiling up at her. The adventure and the humour of it remained with him, but to Kitty it was no study in humour; she could not and would not see it as such. In the half darkness of the closed van, with a canvas screen dropped between her and the two men in front, she saw her husband as a helpless thing, how helpless she did not know. Moreover, though her whole consciousness enveloped him, he was not the Alex of Maleham. There was a strangeness.

His head seemed very low on the floor, and she doubled the cushion under it. His face was vaguely whimsical.

"You haven't kissed me, Kitty."

Nor had she. The recovery of him had been an affair of quivering nostrils and clenched hands, but now she bent over him and pressed her lips to his. She was serious enough in her kissing when she stooped to it. She gave more than he gave. It left them both a little breathless.

"I've got you," she said.

He held one of her hands. His face made her think of a light shining uncertainly in a wind. The gust of her had troubled him, ruffled his self-consciousness, for if he had thought of her sensuously, she had thought of him and for him. That was the difference.

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

"What, Vernor Street?"

"No, our home. I've made it."

His eyes widened, and at that moment the van swung sharply into a by-road where an old white lodge and an oak gate stood in a smother of trees. The suddenness of the turn overbalanced her and flung her away from him against the side of the van. He laughed; he drew her back, but she did not laugh. He seemed to question her solemnity. His eyes warmed.

"Nearly over then—Kitty. But what a jest! What's it, a cottage?"

"Yes, a cottage, on the river."

"And we're going there? I say, isn't this—priceless! How did you get it?"

"I found it. It's just a little place. I hope——"

She was bending over him, and suddenly he realized that she was weeping. His laughing, April mood lay and stared. He was shocked and he was astonished. He did not understand her tears and their suddenness; perhaps no man would have understood them. But he was deeply moved. He had a feeling of having failed her somehow. He put up a hand and touched her face.

"Kitty."

She seized his hand.

"O—I—I hope——"

"My dear—I know I must have hurt you horribly. I haven't been myself. Things—— But I'll try to tell you—all about it. A weak rotter—whimpering in a bed. I've been so——"

She crouched, staring at the canvas side of the van.

and he looked up at her like a sensitive child dismayed and astonished by its mother's tears.

"I didn't believe it, not really, not when I came to myself. But I was so damned helpless and miserable. I——"

She seemed to catch her breath. Her face quivered like light lying upon leaves that are disturbed by a passing shadow and a little breeze. She bent over him till her mouth was close to his.

"If you hadn't believed it would have been just the same. I want things real—— I want to feel——"

His arms went round her.

"Real——! That's a wonderful word—like you."

"Things can be too real."

She puzzled him. Real and too real!

"We've got each other. Tell me about—the little place you've made."

But she could not speak for a moment. He had said "place" not "home." He did not realize her yet. She pressed her forehead against his cheek; she seemed in the midst of some strong and silent spasm. She said—

"It's on the river. It has a garden. It's not a bad little place——"

"I'll love it. Sure to."

Her spasm seemed to harden.

"We have got to try—make a living—you know. I've worked it all out. I don't mind what I do. You'll try to help me——"

"Of course——"

He lay still. His intuitions reached out vaguely. He divined in her something that doubted, and a devotion that thrust with two passionate hands to push the doubt away. But what did she doubt?

"Kitty—I'll try to back you up. I'll——"

Suddenly she sat up and looked at him. It was as though she saw him very clearly, and all that he was and might be and could not be. And she was filled with a great compassion, and a fear.

IV

With the help of George Venables she put her husband to bed in the long room with the big window. She had

prepared everything with such care. She had placed the bed so that he could see the river and the strip of garden between the laurel hedge and the high red-brick wall, and the trees and meadows beyond the river. There was a hot bottle in the bed. She remembered, too, his shyness and her own, and that he had nothing with him but the clothes he lay in, and at the last moment she laid a flannel night-shirt on the bed. She had bought the material and made two of these shirts.

"George will help you to change."

She left them to it, and went out into the garden where the setting sun was stroking the grass and the river with fingers of gold. It was a gentle evening, soft and warm and still, and the river swelled by like quicksilver, save where the sunlight lay yellow upon it. A thrush was singing on the top of the big plane-tree, and from across the river where the meadows were covering themselves with a pearly grey mist a second thrush made an echo. And Kitty stood and gazed, with the sunlight on her face. The buds of the fruit trees were swelling. Old George had been very busy in the garden, and tufts of polyanthus were lacing the beds with velvet. Daffodils were out. Soon there would be wallflowers, myosotis, arabis, and pansies. The grass, rolled, battered, and cut with a mower acquired at a sale, had begun to look sleek. Even the big boat-house had an April air, with its panels of treillage painted green, and its weather-boarding white.

She had done so much, and yet she felt that she had done so little. Would he be happy here? What would he ask of life and of her? He was both a man and a child. Almost, she would have to carry him in her arms while bearing the burden for both of them. But if he was happy she could do it.

With a last look at the garden she went in. She lit the gas stove in the kitchen and put on the kettle. She heard Old George in the passage, and she called to him.

"George——"

"Ma'am."

"Have you managed?"

She was aware of his dog-like face with its kind trustful eyes, and she was glad of him. He had shown a gentleness and a delicacy that had touched her.

"I want things. I can't leave him—just now."

He understood her at once, and the things that were needed.

"He'll be wanting a shave in the morning."

"Could you go out and buy a razor. You'll know. The shops won't be shut yet."

He smiled and nodded.

"I'm used to lifting, ma'am. He's too heavy for you. I can come in and do it. I've done a bit of nursing."

She blessed him.

"You're a good man, George. I've got so much——"

"I can always spare a minute," said he.

She sent him off with a ten-shilling note, and loitered for a moment in the kitchen before going down the passage to her husband's room. Her own hesitation surprised her. She had more courage than most women, but she discovered a sudden fear of that room now that it was empty no longer, but held the very heart of her enterprise. She stood in the passage, conscious of herself and of her undreamed-of vacillations. Why was she afraid? Why did she hesitate? Was it that she had a vague dread of being hurt in there?

She made a sudden movement. She went and opened the door. She had a smile on her face, and she looked quickly towards the bed, and saw the light of the setting sun playing upon it. He turned himself on his side as she entered, and his eyes had a kind of warm eagerness.

"Kitty——"

She closed the door. She paused there for a moment. Her eyes waited. She knew that she was wondering what he would say to her, and that the woman in her craved for certain words, a particular response. She had worked so hard.

He held out a hand and repeated that cry—"Kitty."

Her face seemed to grow grave. She moved across the room, but avoiding the bed, placed herself by the window. She looked through it and saw all that she had planned for him to see, the grass, the flowers, the river, the trees. It was just a little dim to her. She was yearning for him to say a certain thing, and since he did not say it she felt strangely mute.

"I have sent George out to buy a few things. How's the bed?"

"O, jolly comfortable. But, Kitty, come here——"

She turned and saw his face. It had a shine on it, a kind of hunger in the eyes, and for a moment she hesitated, and then went to him as though some clenched purpose held her back. She sat down on the edge of the bed. She felt his arms round her, drawing her down.

"Kit——"

He pulled her close and began to kiss her as he had never kissed her before, and to make intimate, tender murmurings. She felt his warm breath and the quick beating of his heart. She knew what his kisses and his claspings meant. They made her hot and they left her cold. She was aware of a dolorous and poignant struggle going on within her, of the two women in her wanting and refusing to want. She was both mother and wife, and more mother than wife on that fateful evening.

"Kit—I've got you. You darling——"

She gave him passionate kisses for a moment, realizing the maleness of his cry, and the male blindness of him. Yet ought not she to be satisfied? The struggle in her was a pain, a mother-pang. He seemed to be pulling her over the edge of her devoted self-restraint, and slowly she set out to free herself with a gradual and wise gentleness. She played with him, while asking herself if she could always play with him like this.

"My dear. But there's such a lot to do. Kitty's got to be a busy young woman——"

His eyes had a hurt look.

"Must you? Just now?"

She made herself laugh. She patted his head.

"Well—I'm all alone."

"But haven't you got a servant?"

"Not yet. We're two church mice at present. And, heavens!—I left the kettle on my gas stove! If it boils over——"

She escaped, and a part of her felt in tatters. But why couldn't he realize——? Did not men realize——?

V

She was very busy all that evening, and she made herself feel and seem even busier than she was, but all the

things that she had seen herself doing so easily and with such sweet complacency cost her an inward effort. She was realizing her problem. It had uncovered itself to her in one flash when Alex had pulled at her like a spoilt and eager child clamouring for physical satisfactions. Yes—and yes—— She might want them just as much as he did, but she wanted something more from him than that. She had done so much, and she had so much more to do; her head and her heart were full of contrivings, and he had not said a word about the home she had got together. He appeared to have accepted it as a child accepts a tiny house built out of a box of bricks. And when old George Venables returned with a cheap safety-razor and a shaving brush and a rubber sponge, she realized how utterly her husband was on her hands. He had no clothes save the clothes that he had come in. Everything would have to be provided.

She squared herself to it. She was full of a deep compassion; even his childish maleness touched her while it hurt. She prepared his supper, and carried it in prettily on a tray with a little jug full of purple and gold polyanthus. She showed him gaiety, smiles.

"It may be a bit of a picnic, Alex."

He was a little silent, vaguely uneasy, like a child who has been baffled. She made allowances within herself. How could she expect him to be the same man after all that had happened to him? Possibly she divined in him a pathetic greediness, a desire to snatch at satisfactions that had been out of his reach.

Later, she had to do other things for him, very intimate things, and she did them with a chaste and deliberate dignity. She had divined their necessity. It was like doing things for a child, but for a child who was both awkward and self-conscious and full of uneasy preoccupations. She tried to make her ministrations seem as natural as the bringing of his food. She made herself talk. But she was aware of him as another personality, of a beloved but short-sighted creature watching her and thinking its own thoughts, uneasily sensitive, sensuously alive.

He was both shy and bold. She brought him some books, and placed a lighted candle on a table beside the bed.

"I have to wash up."

He picked up one of the books and opened it perfunctorily.

"You'll come back soon?"

"I'll put you to bed."

While washing up she felt suddenly very tired, not physically so, but with an overpowering, inward tiredness. She finished her work. She went back to her husband's room. He appeared to be reading. She carried a chair to the bedside; she was yearning for companionship, and understanding; she wanted him to talk, and to be able to talk to him as a sympathetic, intelligent mate. She did not want him to bear things, but she did want to feel that he understood them.

He put the book away. He caught her wrist; he pulled her towards him. His eyes had a tense, strained look.

"Kitty, aren't you going to sleep with me? I think—I—can—manage——"

She felt strangely shocked, overwhelmed, but she rose above it. She bent over him suddenly; she took his head in her arms. She poured herself out; she said to him things of intimate and sacred meaning. She tried to soothe and to caress, while she denied.

"My dear—not now—not yet. It isn't because—I'm cold. But think——"

She became aware of a sensitive sullenness in him, something that both consented and would not consent. His arms grew slack. And in trying to feel what ailed him, his baulkings, his disappointments, and perhaps his shame, she held him closer.

"O—my little boy—my man——"

His responses were as slack as his arms. He seemed immensely grieved with himself and with her. He became deplorably mute.

She kissed him and drew away. Her lips were quivering.

"I'll put this bell here. If you ring—I shall hear. I'll come at once——"

He lay and stared at the ceiling.

"O—I shall be all right. I shan't bother you——"

She went to her bed feeling torn and weary.

CHAPTER XXIV

I

Alex St. George lay and gazed at the river slipping past the strip of grass between the laurel hedge and the red-brick wall. In the centre of this sloping lawn a round flower-bed wore a coronet of red and white daisies, and claret-coloured and yellow polyanthus. Sometimes—but not often—a boat passed across the strip of water that was visible to the man in the chair. Beyond it the vista broadened into the grey-green meadows and the still, leafless trees.

At six o'clock he had heard Kitty moving overhead. His waking mood had not been a happy one, and his wife's movements had seemed to emphasize his own complete helplessness. Insensibly he had become accustomed to thinking of himself as helpless. At half-past six Kitty had come down the stairs and gone into the kitchen. Fifteen minutes later she had appeared with an early cup of tea and two pieces of thin bread and butter. She had bent down and kissed him.

"Slept well, boy?"

"Not so very well. You should not have bothered about this."

"Is it a bother?"

Something in her eyes had disconcerted him. She had appeared to stand aside looking at him with a gentle and considering aloofness, and then she had slipped away, and he had fallen into a strange, sulky stare. He had pitied himself. His April mood had passed in the night. He had felt himself something less than a man.

At eight o'clock George Venables had come in to help him dress before lifting him from the bed to the long cane chair in the window. There had been very little con-

versation between them; Old George was shy and critical, and Alex discomfited.

At half-past eight Kitty had brought him his breakfast —tea, toast, two rashers of bacon, a poached egg, butter and marmalade. She had placed the tray on his lap.

"Can you manage, dear?"

"O—perfectly."

He had felt himself weighed down by a voiceless and overwhelming self-depreciation. His self-humiliation had become wilful. It had made him look sulky. It had desolated him and her. He seemed to be saying to himself—"I'm a useless wretch. She has to fetch and carry for me, to treat me like a child. I'm nothing but a nuisance. Why did I let her bring me here——?"

She had come to take his tray away. He had shown her a drooping lassitude; he had not said that he had enjoyed his breakfast. He had not enjoyed it; he had been ready to choke over it.

"I shall have to leave you, boy, for awhile."

"Of course. That's all right."

He lay and looked at the river. It moved, and he could not. He became conscious of the chair, that he needed another cushion, that he was uncomfortable within and without. It was not so good a chair as the one at Cardigan Square. Miserable beast that he was to feel it to be less comfortable! He grovelled in self-humiliation, and threw away the last shreds of his self-respect, and felt his stomach like a twisted knot in a bag of emptiness. He said: "I know what I am. That shell ought to have finished it. I'm not fit even to be a husband. I haven't the right to be a husband."

He heard Kitty coming. She had a bright, grave face.

"Anything I can get you, Alex?"

He moved himself.

"Could I have another cushion?"

She found another cushion, and with great gentleness placed it where it was needed, and her gentleness made him acutely and uncouthly miserable. Why should she have to do all this? Why should he have to ask——? And he had nothing to say to her. She went out from

him with a bright, firm face, telling herself that this mood of his was a natural reaction. He had flopped, and it was part of her problem to rescue him from such floundering, and to fill him with new interests, and a recreated self-respect. She realized that somehow she would have to find things for him to do. But how unexpected life was! She had imagined things happening so differently.

So—she endured during that first day. She went about her work with a patient and determined face. She made beds, cleaned, cooked, consulted with Old George and a jobbing carpenter who were laying down the new floor in the boat-house. Old George's eyes seemed to watch her like the eyes of a dog. He knew what sickness was. That young chap in there wanted the corners of his mouth pulling up.

Kitty's mouth was a straight line. When her work was done she went in to sit with her husband. She felt all his soreness, the wilful accentuations of his depression, his poor moody self-humiliation. She tried to make him talk. She was saying to him in her heart—"O, my dear, don't let yourself go down like this. Talk to me. Let things out. You can say everything to me. I want you to be happy. I don't mind so long as you are happy——"

Her patience held. At five o'clock Old George came in with brushed coat and washed hands to lift Alex back to his bed, and remembering that Old George had an invalid of his own Kitty sent him home when he had done the lifting for her. But she went to the front door with Old George; he did some of her shopping for her.

"Can you buy me two pairs of socks and a shirt?"

"Yes, ma'am; I'll get 'em at Draper's."

"You are very kind, George. It's good of you to do that lifting. He's so very helpless."

Old George had a quaint way of looking wisely and sadly down his broad nose.

"When you've got to lift things with your heart, miss, as well as with your hands, it comes a bit heavy."

She went back to her husband and undressed him; she slipped the flannel nightshirt over his head and smoothed it under him; she did for him those various intimate things. And under her careful hands his lassitude

seemed to increase; he appeared to grow more helpless and more voiceless.

"It's going to be an awful bore for you—doing all this."

That was as far as he would go.

"Do you think so?" she asked him.

She made a little laugh of it, yet—almost she could have smacked him for making a moan over so obvious a necessity. Why did he not accept the obvious, and having made the best of it, prepare to rise above it with a smile? Why did he not blurt out his soul to her, and so make the immediate problem easier for them both? She was very tired. To be cheerful for two is peculiarly exhausting, even more exhausting than bearing the noise of chattering fools. She felt the need of being alone for awhile, quite alone with her own human problem. She went out into the garden and walked up and down on the grass beside the river, with the same thrush singing on the same tree while a gentle dusk descended. She felt rather miserable. For what an anticlimax was this after all her sturdy waitings and contrivings! And yet—surely—it was only a phase? He was too sensitive. He gave way to things; he wilted. But she must refuse to let him wilt or to give way to peevish self-pity. She would have to make him interested, insist on his being interested.

O, poor lad!

She went in again full of pity, the pity that one feels for some one particular person. It filled her, and sustained her. She busied herself with his little dinner, for he had had his dinner at Cardigan Square, and he should have it now. She let her curiosity travel to Cardigan Square. Mrs. St. George! What rages, what puzzlements, what a wigging of servants! Telephonings here and there! Yes, she—the wife—had got him; she held his body, but what of the real him, the man, the sick and peevish child? Yes, she would still have to go on fighting and smiling and enduring. Such a battle was not won in three days.

That evening she went in and sat beside his bed. She had determined to talk to him about the cottage and their future, her plans, money and how they were to get it. She wondered if he realized that money had to be

made. He had never lacked money, comforts, toys. He had never had to work, or to strike his fist against life's fundamentals. Work or starve! Get money, or be an underling, to be pushed into crowded corners.

She had nothing of the socialist in her composition; she despised the socialist idea as her mother despised it; she was ready to strive for what was hers.

She said to him: "How do you like my carpet, boy? It took me a month to find it."

He looked rather vaguely at the carpet.

"Jolly nice. Where did you get it?"

"At a sale. I can tell you it was a great game, my dear, getting this little place furnished."

"Must have been."

His vagueness continued. It was the vagueness of the sick, and sensitive introvert with the skin of his consciousness turned inwards. He was full of his self-depreciations, wilful abasements. He persisted in feeling a worm, a dull and unimpressive worm.

"Don't you want to hear all about it?"

"About—what?"

"Well, we have to make a living. It ought to be great fun making a living. Are you any good at arithmetic?"

He raised his hands and let them fall, and the gesture expressed his mood. "I'm no good at anything. I shall never be good at anything." She looked hard at him, and smothered something, and, pressing her lower lip against her teeth, went on with her talking. She caught herself feeling like a schoolmistress, and talking like one, and he lay and listened like a listless child. Never had life seemed so pitiful and so provoking. Her pity had an edge of exasperation. He was making no effort to understand her or even to listen.

She said—with vehement self-restraint: "You are tired, my dear." And he nodded. His eyes had a wide and vacant expression. He seemed to be incapable of fixing his attention upon any subject, or of rising above the dead level of the day's despondency.

"Poor old lad."

She bent down and kissed him, and tears came into his eyes.

"I'll not worry you any more to-night."

But the day's mothering had left her discouraged and

very weary, and she went to her bed very much in need of her own mother. She wanted to let herself go to somebody, to press her head against Mrs. Sarah's splendid and warm solidity.

II

And next day Mrs. Sarah came. Kitty had sent her mother a telegram on the morning of the second day, and Mrs. Sarah having looked good over it, had remained with infinite discretion at No. 7 Vernor Street. Vine Cottage and Alex were Kitty's affair, and a wise woman should be in no hurry to dip a spoon in her daughter's broth. Let these two young things possess the two first days together, and find each other, and sort out the recovered threads of their interwoven future.

Alex heard Mrs. Sarah enter the cottage. He heard her voice and Kitty's voice, and the sounds seemed to embrace and mingle and to flow away into the kitchen and to become muffled there. He lay and listened. He discovered in himself a little and unexplained fear of Mrs. Sarah; the cottage was made different by her coming into it. She had a boisterousness, a brevity, a hearty vigour that disturbed even at a distance the stagnation of his self-pity. He had been letting himself float in a despondency that was like the green slime. It is even possible that he had become to like it a little. It was so effortless. It responded to his emotions, and damped them down, and suffered the vibrations to die away into succulent gloom.

Mrs. Sarah's voice stirred other vibrations. She seemed to be talking very hard and fast, and with a *gaillard*, and buoyant vehemence. She was enjoying herself; she had every right to enjoy herself and Kitty. Yes, she, Mrs. Sarah, had had a visit from Mrs. St. George.

"Bless you—I know I may be a vulgar old woman—my dear, but I do enjoy life. Yes—she arrived yesterday like a white squall. She accused me of having Alex in the house. Did I know anything of Alex and his whereabouts? Of course not! Really, I think I treated her rather well, poppet. I took her all over the house. I felt like old Foch with the Germans at his knees. She was furious, but she kept it in."

"So she does not know yet?"

"She has been to the police. But what can she do?"

"She may try to remove him by force when she finds out that I have Alex here."

"I think not, my dear. That would mean housebreaking. Rather too large an order even for Mrs. St. George. Besides—the lad has a voice of his own—now."

Kitty sat down on a kitchen chair, with her elbows on the kitchen table. She looked out of the window.

"I wish he had," she said.

Alex could still hear the two voices, but their notes had dropped to an intimate and subdued murmuring. No doubt they were discussing him, and what was to be done with him, and the burden of him. And so they were. His sensitiveness had too thin a skin, or rather—it picked up too many sensations of the same order.

Presently he heard the opening of a door, and a sudden enlarging of the two voices. They sounded very cheerful. Obviously Mrs. Sarah was coming to see him, and he flinched from the imminence of her vigorous solidity. He was like an absurd and peevish child; he would like to have hidden himself under the bedclothes.

Mrs. Sarah came in. She was alone. She closed the door, and crossing to the bed, sat down sideways on the foot of it with an air of friendly and triumphant good humour.

"Well—here we are."

She did not mince matters. She assumed that her son-in-law found himself in the best of all possible worlds. The romance was still a romance. And wasn't Kitty wonderful!

He had to agree, though his self-depreciation resented the glare of his wife's goodness.

"Did it all herself, my dear. Even stripped the old paper off the walls. And here you are—launched on the adventure. A nice little home, and a nice little game to play at making a living. O, you'll do it between you! You'll back up your little wife."

He felt like a flat cold fish ready to scuffle away down into the mud away from the glow of Mrs. Sarah's enthusiasm. What an abominably cheerful woman it was! And he was realizing himself to be a mere parasite.

a sucking thing, dependent upon his wife for every sort of humiliating little ministration. Where was the triumph?

He felt himself sinking through the bed when Mrs. Sarah got up from it, and returned to her daughter and her daughter's affairs. He heard the women's voices mingle again. They appeared to drift out into the garden and into the illusion of light that an April day provided.

Mrs. Sarah was speaking.

"You have taken the measurement of the passage and doorways? I'll get it—straight away—and order it to be sent down. Yes, have a doctor in, a young one, one who's not too soft. What, my dear? A good smacking. Take it early. It's kinder in the end. It might do him all the good in the world, poor lad."

III

There were three doctors practising in and about Shelford, and Dr. Drake was George Venables' recommendation. Old George had no very great faith in the medical profession, but Dr. Drake had been to the war and was home again, and was supposed to be clever with his hands. So Kitty sent for Dr. Drake, and he came in a small grey car, a short, thick-set, bright-eyed man with a face that was both droll and imperturbable. He had a smile; he was laconic; and he could keep still. He sat in Kitty's parlour, and listened to all that she had to say, and asked her a few pointed questions. He inspired her with her confidence from the very first, and she showed him a good sense by giving him her confidence in return.

"Well, let's have a look at him. Do you mind if I see him alone?"

"I leave it to you."

He looked at Alex very thoroughly. He sat on the edge of the bed and talked and observed his patient. He had retained the abrupt and realistic outlook of the war, and he was one of those men who might retain it to the end of his days, and remain on the crest of youth's wave. Nothing but the real would satisfy him, that and the search for it. He looked straight ahead. He belonged

to a generation that refused to be impressed by long words, or by parental shibboleths or the wisdom of the ancients. He had a sort of whimsical, kind ruthlessness. To him life was like a relay-race: you snatched the baton from the failing hand of the past, and sped ahead without looking back till some other racer took the baton from you. What did that matter! Speed, the getting there, were the things that mattered.

He was instantly interested in Alex. Here was a case, a young machine out of gear, a double disharmony, physical and mental. So, when his examination was over, he sat on Alex's bed and talked to him with a whimsical cheeriness that was as subtle as the trained hand of the surgeon. He watched Alex's eyes and his mouth, and his movements, or his lack of movement. He refrained from being too aggresively inquisitive—at least—to begin with. He had learnt to know his types, and to generalize about them, and at the same time he was alive to the falseness of easy generalizations. Man and his consciousness appear so incoherent now that the doubting Edwardians have followed the comfortably earnest Victorians into their coffins. We—of the new age sometimes wish to be in earnest, but about what? Drake had found nothing to be in earnest about save his job. You left the New Paganism and the New Psychism to the talkers. Even with a new eruption of the barbarians—of the mechanical mob—you would still hope for your super-scientist, a new Messiah with a light-ray or a death-ray, who, by pressing a button in his laboratory, could efface all mobs and mobbishness.

Drake talked to Alex as he had talked to young officers during the war. It was the voice of the M.O.—man addressing man.

"Well, my lad, what are you going to do to amuse yourself?"

It was a question that Alex found difficult to answer. Here was another visitor who was as cheerful as Mrs. Sarah, but cheerful with a difference.

"I don't know, doc. I'm so jolly helpless."

"So you will be, my lad, if you let yourself feel like that. You'll get a fatty head and a fatty heart."

Alex's eyelids flickered.

"I'm nothing but a sort of parasite."

"Rot, my lad. We shall have to find you something to do, even if it is nothing but peeling potatoes."

He gave Alex's shoulder a grip, looking down at him with kind ruthlessness, and went out to speak with Kitty. He found her in the kitchen making cakes, and he sat down on a kitchen chair, and told her to go on with her cake-making.

"I have had a thorough look at your husband, Mrs. St. George. I should like to watch him for a time. These cases can be rather complicated. He's apt to get depressed about himself."

She looked at the solid and imperturbable face across the table. Dr. Drake's skin had a dustiness. He had very little facial expression, but when you met his wary, grey-black eyes you felt the man's vitality coiled like a spring behind them.

"Very depressed. I'm worried about it."

"Quite right. He must not be allowed to feel like that. It's insidious; it's like a drug habit. We must get him out of it."

He observed her, and she observed him in return. A little smile seemed to pass between them.

"I mustn't be—too—easy?"

"Exactly. Rouse him. Get his self-respect kicking. Try and find him something to do, something that will make him feel that he is being of use."

She nodded.

"I'll try. We are not very well off, doctor. I shall have to make a living here."

"Don't worry about my fees. You'll manage. What are you going to do?"

"Give teas and dances. My idea is to get hold of the river people. I've worked it all out."

He smiled with his eyes, and getting up, looked at her with shrewd kindness.

"Excellent idea. Fine exercise—dancing. I'll prescribe it for some of my patients and send them on to you. —By the way—rub his legs well twice a day, and be careful about his skin. But don't dwell too much on those legs of his; you understand? I'll drop in again in two or three days' time."

CHAPTER XXV

I

Kitty heard the wind in the trees, and the uneasy lapping of the river. She had come out by the passage door into the garden, locking the door after her and taking the key, and as though moved by the wind and an impulse of her own she went round to the window of her husband's room. April, turned tempestuous, buffeted the laurel hedge behind her. In the greyness of the dusk the river had a look of haste, and the western sky was pale primrose, and against this paleness blue-black clouds smudged themselves. The big plane-tree sang a song of its own. In the flower-beds the wallflowers bent to the wind.

She looked in at the window. She had lit a candle for him, and left him cigarettes and a book on the table beside the bed. She had said—"I must rush down the village. That idiot Fuller forgot to send the tea." She had seen a whimpering resignation in his eyes. What need was there for her to tell him where she was going and why?

Yes, the candle was burning and he was reading the book she had left him. She saw eight white fingers outlined against the dark cover. The colours of the room were dim but recognizable, the red walls, the white paint, the biscuit-coloured carpet, the apple-green bedspread, and yet the room impressed her as a fabric that had faded. It had been so vivid to her on the day of his coming, and now it seemed blurred, covered with a dusty sadness.

She slipped away. She was conscious of a sudden passionate rage against life, a clenching of her fists, a setting of her chin. Something would have to be done. She could not allow him to go on behaving like a moody and hysterical child; he would have to be shaken out of his humours. Her fingers touched the latch of the door that opened from the garden into the lane. She opened the door, closed it with vehement self-restraint and stood

for the moment holding the iron handle. She was aware of the fresh green surface of the door dimmed to blackness by the dusk. The wind rushed over the river and made a roaring in the elms and the chestnuts, a potent and a vigorous wind, and it stirred a response in her.

She hurried up Shelford Lane, keeping to the middle of the road. Windows were being lit up. She saw a big coarse, red hand drawing down a blind. A few children came scuffling and screaming under the pollarded limes, and one of them— a little oafish boy—blundered against her. She thrust him off—and with such impatience that he lurched against a tree and remained there for a moment mute and astonished. Yes, life was boiling up in her, a rage against childishness. By the church a man was turning the handle of a car that refused to start, and she observed the resentful jerks of his hunched shoulders. A thing that refused to start! The windows of the Ship Inn were like yellow eyes blinking in the wind. It looked a frowsy place, like a slovenly woman in a hurry. Sounds came from it, voices, a silly laugh given with a mouth wide open and a head lolling back. She went on to the grocer's. She found the window blinds being lowered. Her words were as curt as her entry. The man who served her with a take it or leave it face, that had not yet recovered from the war, was made to feel the gustiness of her impatience.

She hurried back. The lane was both darker and more patched with light. The wind made a roaring in the trees; a star shone here and there between the racing clouds. She had reached the door in the wall when she noticed a figure leaning against the white shutters of the Vine Cottage shop. She was suspicious. She walked on. The figure that had propped itself against her shutters remained attached to them with a loutish casualness. She looked at it carefully and with a deliberation that should have made it uncomfortable.

The figure spat.

"I've got a girl, miss, thanks."

He saw her eyes in the dusk, very round and gleaming. Yes, men were abnormally precious in these days, and even a Surrey lout had a rude quip ready, and a sense of his sexual importance. He had nothing to do but to lean against a wall and wait for the female to come to

him. She turned and walked back to the garden door. Yes, life was boiling up in her. She had wondered whether that loafing figure had had any significant connection with Cardigan Square, for she knew that her days of concealment must come to an end. And she was conscious of a feeling of exasperation. Some day—no doubt—his mother would arrive, and she—Kitty—would have nothing to show her but a figure of a failure, a whimpering child who refused to be happy.

She opened the door, and in closing it the latch pinched one of her fingers.

"Damn!" she said; "yes—damn!"

She was the daughter of Mrs. Sarah, and her reactions had a like vitality and vigour. She locked the door, and passed round the cottage to realize that the long window was in darkness. What did it mean? He had blown out the candle. He was lying there in the darkness, adding it to his self-made gloom, wrapping himself in it. Her anger was at her lips. She felt that she must rouse him out of this lassitude before the intervention of his mother. She must be able to show the other woman——

She passed on. She let herself in and relocked the door; she turned on the kitchen lights; she tossed her packet of tea on to the table. She took off her hat and her raincoat. Now for it! She was quivering. She went down the passage to his room and opened the door, and saw the window dimly grey. In the bed there was a movement.

"What, all in the dark?"

His voice came dully.

"Don't turn on the light. Kitty. I have something to say."

"O?"

She closed the door.

"What's the matter?"

"I can't stay here, Kitty."

She moved a little way into the room.

"How is that?"

"It's too—too shameful. I can't let you scrub and scrape for me, wear yourself out. It's nothing but drudgery—I'd rather——"

She went quietly to the window and stood looking out at the dim garden and the river.

"You would rather go back to Cardigan Square?"
"It would make it easier for you, Kitty."

II

Her silence was like a bubble blown from a pipe. It swelled, it floated into the air, and then it burst.

She turned on him. She went quickly to the foot of the bed, and putting her two hands to the iron bar of the frame, she let the muscles of her arms and chest strain against it. She said:

"Very well, go back. I've done everything that could be done. I have worked for weeks getting this little home ready. I have tried to think of everything. But you have no pluck——"

The tension of her arms made the bed quiver, conveying to it the vibrations of her little body's anger.

"You just lie there and grouse. You haven't made an effort to help me or to help yourself. I shouldn't mind the work and the worry. After all—one's got to work, and worries are like the poor—— I waited for you. I waited for you when you didn't believe in me. I went on believing. I thought you would have the courage to make the best of the best I could give you. For—I have given you my best——"

He was voiceless. She could see his dim face looking up at her with its wide and sensitive eyes. She felt them to be frightened eyes, but she went on striking.

"You had better go back. I can't help you if you won't try to help yourself. What's the use? I brought you here because I wanted you to be happy—and I wanted to be happy, too. We might have been. I'll write to your mother to-morrow. She can send her car——"

She gave the bed a shake, though she was not conscious of doing it, and going quickly to the door, she got herself out of the room, and closed the door after her. She leant against it. Her anger had passed like the wind, leaving her strangely exhausted. She felt that she could sink to the floor, but she would not let herself sink; she stiffened her knees; she listened. In the room there was absolute silence, a shocked, bewildered silence. It made her yearn and it made her despair, but she smothered her yearnings, gave her head a shake, and walked down the passage into

the kitchen. She found herself staring at the packet of tea. She seized it, ripped it open, clutched the red canister from the shelf and emptied the tea into it. She lit the gas stove. She filled the kettle at the sink, turning the tap full on, and letting the water splash over. What did it matter? She could have taken all the crockery from the shelves and smashed it with a wild and delicious violence. But suddenly she held herself in. She wiped the kettle with an old dishcloth, and placed it on the stove, and saw that the gas was burning neither too high nor too low. She was saying things to herself—"Hold tight. Don't be hysterical. It all depends on you." And with a deliberate calmness she set about preparing her husband's dinner, collecting her plates and dishes, a tin of sardines, bread, butter, a bottle of preserved fruit, custard powder, the little saucepan containing his coffee. She grew calm, inexorable——

And suddenly she heard the tinkling of his handbell. The sound came out of the dark silence appealingly. She stood still. She compelled herself to ignore it; she went on with her work.

III

Twenty minutes passed, and Kitty was whipping up some custard in a little white basin when she heard him calling.

"Kitty—Kitty——"

She paused. She remained very still for some moments in that brightly lit little kitchen; she looked at the clock on the mantelpiece; she drew a deep breath and went on with the whipping of the custard. But she was all ears, quick with suspense and with her wonderings as to the virtue of her castigations. How much of a man was he? Would he accept her silence, or had she roused in him a spirit that could be remorseful and urgent and proud?

Again she heard him calling—"Kitty—Kitty," and the appeal in his voice could not be questioned. She went and washed her hands at the sink and dried them on the roller towel behind the door, and a sudden exultation tingled in her, even to her finger-tips. She remembered to turn off the tap of the gas stove. She walked slowly down the passage and opened his door.

"Did you call?"

The room was in darkness, and out of the darkness his voice seemed to grope towards her.

"Kitty—what a beast I've been——"

That cry of his seemed to be in her own body. She was with him instantly, bending over him in the darkness, passionate, triumphant, yet celebrating no selfish victory.

"O—my dear——"

He had found one of her hands and was kissing it.

"I don't want to go back—— Don't send me away. I know now. I've been such an utter rotter. I want to talk. Hold my head, hold my head like you used to do."

She lay beside him on the bed, and held his head in her arms.

"Say everything—I shall understand——"

She felt his face against her bosom, and his voice came muffled.

"I was so ashamed—but—I suppose—it was weak of me. I know now—if you will let me stay—I'll never be like that again. I promise. I've been through hell, and come through on the right side. I want to help. Can't I help—somehow——"

She put her lips to his head.

"Of course—lots of things. But smiling and being happy helps most. Don't you see—— A woman doesn't mind work—when she's happy and someone else is happy. Why, just think. This is our own little show, our very own little show, boy. It's like playing a great game. It's going to be so exciting——"

He held her close.

"Kitty, you're a great little woman. I won't let you down again. I promise—O—I'm happy—happy. Something has happened inside me. I was so shocked, so scared—I'll begin now—and to-morrow—I'll—— There must be lots of things—— If I could get about a bit——"

She said: "You shall. There is one of those wheeled chairs coming. You will be able to trundle yourself about."

"O—great! But I want to hear about things. Tell me about things, everything——"

She pressed his head.

"There's your dinner—— I must get it ready. But after dinner——"

She felt him make a happy stirring in her arms. Then he lay still; he was looking at the dim window.

"Kitty, some things one can't help, but there are things one can. Grousing's cowardly. I'll keep smiling——"

IV

After a dinner which she shared with him, bringing up a little table and sitting beside his bed, they passed what was perhaps the happiest evening of their lives. She had drawn the curtains across the window and turned on a shaded light above the bed. The melancholy candle was discarded. She sat beside him, leaning against the pillows, with a writing pad on her knees. She was going to draw plans and pictures for him.

But he said:

"I want to look at the room, our room."

He raised himself in bed; he looked about him with a sensitive, smiling eagerness, and with a new life in his eyes.

"Isn't it—pretty. It's the prettiest room—— I like the shape. And then—that window—and the river."

"That's why I took the cottage."

"Did you? By God—dear—I'll try and deserve it."

With his head against her shoulder she made play with a stumpy pencil, drawing plans on the writing pad. They chattered like two children, and with tongue and pencil she described the cottage and the garden. "Here's the lawn where we can serve teas. And here's the boat-house. We have let in more light by cutting out panels in the walls, and fixing trellis or curtains. The floor is half finished; it measures forty feet by twenty. I thought of having a big gramophone with a large trumpet."

He exclaimed with sudden excitement—"I say, I've had banjo lessons. I can vamp quite well, and I've a sense of time. I can be the band, a drum and a pair of cymbals, and a bit of banjo thrown in to help the gramophone."

She hugged him.

"Splendid! Of course you can. Old George is going to look after the boats, and I shall have a girl in to help with the teas. Now—I wonder what we shall make——?" She began to scribble figures, and he watched the jottings of her pencil.

"I thought of charging 1*s.* for tea alone, 2*s.* 6*d.* for tea and dancing. A good tea will cost me somewhere about 8*d.* That would leave a profit of 1*s.* 10*d.* on each dance

tea. We shall have to get a licence, and there will be the tax. Of course—if the thing goes well—we might put up the price."

And then he too desired a pencil and a piece of paper, and they scribbled in chorus, and chattered, and conceived sudden inspirations.

"Say twenty couples every Saturday and Sunday, Kit. Twenty couples at 3*s.* 6*d.* profit per couple, a hundred and forty shillings, seven pounds each week-end. But how many week-ends?"

"Allow twenty."

"That's £40 a year."

He stared gravely at the sum figured on paper. It was not very impressive. She took up the chant.

"Yes, but there will be the odd teas on ordinary days. And we may get parties. Call it £200. And if I open the shop——"

"How much can we live on?"

"We must try and do it on £300 including wages. I have a little money of my own; my 'Cobbold' shares have doubled. I had £300 in them."

"By Jove," said he, "what an ass I am! Of course I've some money lying at Cox's. And then there will be my gratuity. I wonder if it is too late to do anything about a disability pension? But I must have two or three hundred lying at Cox's, not counting my gratuity——"

"Dear boy——"

"I'll write to them to-morrow. I can bring the money into our show. We must pay your mother—she's been a brick."

"O, mother's not worrying."

He had another inspiration.

"I say, I could keep the accounts, couldn't I? I'll be bandmaster and book-keeper, and all sorts of things. Great! If only I can be of some use——"

She was happy. And when she went to her little room and drew back the curtains and opened the window, she saw that the sky had cleared, and that the stars were showing. She leaned out into the night. She heard the wind in the trees, and saw the ruffled river dimly swelling by. The night smelt sweet. O, happy moments, and quiet breathing! She knew that she need not fear his mother, nor perhaps—any woman.

CHAPTER XXVI

I

To Alex St. George the window of his room suddenly enlarged itself. There seemed more of the sky to be seen, more of the river and of the meadows and trees beyond it, more of the life of the birds busy with the year's increase. The old red wall sunned itself. The wall-flowers in the round bed in the centre of the strip of grass were unfolding from the swelling green of their buds petals of maroon and of yellow. For we carry our own world about with us, and as Alex's consciousness enlarged itself and caught the sensitive urge of the spring, so did the window grow more wonderful. He felt that he had a heart, muscles, hands. He was a young bird on a bough.

To Old George, coming in to lift him from bed to chair, he showed a face of acceptance and of freshness.

"I say, when I get my wheeled chair, George, do you think that there is anything I could find to do down at the boat-house?"

A smile slipped from Old George's blue eyes and seemed to trickle down his broad nose.

"Sure of finding something, sir, if you look for it."

Wholesome fellow—George, and happy with his hands. He went out caressing his big blond moustache, considering the things that might be accomplished by a man who had lost the use of his legs. Yes, there were things that Mr. Alex could do, but would it not be more exciting for Mr. Alex to discover them for himself? Surely! A child should be encouraged to make or find its own toys. The little plutocrats of the nursery—sallow stuff! The tappings of Mr. Venables' hammer resounded under the hollow roof.

By some happy coincidence the wheeled chair arrived

in a crate that very morning. Kitty had it carried to the grass under her husband's window, and she unpacked it there after Old George had knocked out the side of the crate. There was a mass of paper and string and straw bands, and as she worked, with Alex watching her, she thought of this chair as a chariot of victory.

"I'm going to try it."

She pushed her honey-coloured bobbed head through the open window, and her eyes were mischievous.

"All right. And—afterwards——"

She got into the chair and trundled herself along the path, and then took a turn over the grass, encircling the flower bed.

"It's quite easy."

His eyes were bright and eager.

"Let me try. Put me into it."

The side door opening out upon the bricked path was wide enough to admit the chair, and Kitty, having wiped the wheels with a duster, pushed the chair in. Old George was stuffing straw and paper back into the crate. He went in to help. They inserted Alex into his overcoat, placed him in the wheeled chair, and stood regarding him like a couple of pleased parents.

"What about a cushion?"

He had an intent, purposeful look.

"No, it's jolly comfortable. But won't the wheels be rather hard on the carpet?"

"O, never mind the carpet."

She went out, giving Old George a beckoning look with her eyes, and he, following her, rubbed a thoughtful nose. Outside she whispered, and received a smiling, sidelong stare, for Old George understood. He returned to his boat-house, and she to her kitchen.

Meanwhile, Alex's face had taken on the intent expression of a child interested in some new problem. Very carefully he moved himself about the long room, avoiding the furniture, and trying such simple experiments as bringing himself alongside the table or bed. He tried going forwards and backwards, turning, stopping at a particular spot. He was a little flushed. And presently the open door giving on to the brick path inevitably offered itself and the adventure of the wider world beyond. He eyed it, measured it. He trundled him-

self towards it. There would not be much space to spare between the wheels and the doorposts. Moreover the doorway had a raised ledge or sill, and at the first attempt—not hitting the sill squarely with both wheels—the chair swerved and jammed itself between the posts. He backed out and tried again, and again got himself pinched in the doorway. But at the third attempt, with his hands working hard at the wheels, he propelled the chair over the sill, and found himself on the brick path.

He was breathing hard; his face had a flush of triumph. He had accomplished something.

"Good business! I'm outside."

He felt that he had a sky over his head that he could regard as his own, and an earth that was new and yet his. And the sun was shining, and he let himself rest there for a minute in the sunlight, before going on his voyage of exploration. He trundled himself down beside the laurel hedge, found the opening in it, and appeared in the garden, seeing it for the first time with an intimate realization of its personal meaning, a green and flowery way between the faded redness of the old cottage and the stately glide of the river. He looked up at the great plane tree; he bent down and touched the grass with his fingers.

His wife was on the watch. She saw him coming along the lower path, his figure darkened by having the sunlit surface of the river for a background. He was leaning forward in the chair, moving himself rather slowly, but with a suggestion of purposeful haste. He seemed to be pressing forward into new country, youth chained but eager.

He turned the chair abruptly and faced the cottage. He called out to her.

"Kitty, where are you?"

She showed herself at the window, and he waved.

"I'm out."

His pride was as obvious as a child's, and his showing off before her had pathos and naïveté. Here was the old, lovable Alex.

"Come out, Kitty. Let's go round."

She came out to him, and her movements seemed to have a happy gliding smoothness. She did not touch

the chair, but left him to his own devices and the zest of his own endeavour. But she praised him.

"You can manage it—already."

"O—I'll manage all sorts of things—I want to see the boat-house; I want to see everything. Come along. But don't help me; I want to feel responsible."

She had no intention of helping him unless he could not help himself, but she walked beside the chair between it and the river, like a young mother accompanying a child that is learning to toddle. Her impulse was to say—"Be careful of the river," but she did not say it; she was careful not to fuss his striving and renascent manhood.

"This way."

Between the Vine Cottage garden and the boat-house, where an opening had been cut in the fence, Old George had made a temporary path of half-bricks and cinders. There were two yards or so of soft and boggy bumpiness, and Alex's chair showed a disclination to advance. Kitty watched him fight his way through, straining like a determined child to attain its object. He got through that soft patch, and she wanted to bend down and kiss him

II

Having cast his eyes over their Canaan, and pushed his chair as far as the great chestnut trees beyond the black shed, he turned back and came to rest outside the boat-house where Old George and the jobbing carpenter were at work. Kitty left him there, for she had cooking to do, and he sat and watched the jobbing man clamping floor boards together before nailing them to the joists. Old George had half a dozen boards laid across three short pieces of timber and was smearing some brown stuff on them with a long-handled brush.

Alex watched him with the air of a child in a perambulator watching some other child actively and satisfyingly busy.

"I say—George——!"

"Sir——"

"What's that stuff?"

"Creosote, sir. Giving the under sides of the boards a dressing before we nail 'em down."

'Couldn't I do that? If the boards were laid out here——"

"Don't see why you shouldn't, sir."

In fact there was no reason why Mr. St. George should not swab creosote over the timber provided that the ground was prepared for him, and somebody exercised a little ingenuity. Old George, choosing a spot where the ground was fairly flat, arranged four twelve foot boards side by side, and poured out a supply of creosote into a tin with a wire handle.

"If I put the tin on the boards, sir."

"I can lift it with the brush—and move it along as I work."

"You can."

Old George returned to the particular job upon which he had been engaged before he had taken up the tar brush—the manufacture of a number of solid, garden tables, but he kept an interested watch upon Alex. Mr. St. George had the tar brush across his knees, the wet end of it projecting well away and clear of the chair. He manœuvred himself into position at the end where Old George had placed the tin of creosote, and having got himself just where he wanted to be, he began methodically to brush on the brown stuff.

"Work it well in, sir," said Mr. Venables.

"Right you are."

When he had covered as much of the timber as he could reach, he slipped the end of the brush under the wire handle and moved the tin, laid the brush handle across his knees, and transferred himself and the chair to a new position. His new move took him too far, and he could not reach the tin with the brush, and had to reverse and readjust matters.

"Better have an old sack over your knees, sir."

"Right-o——"

Old George noticed that Alex made no more mistakes in altering the position of his chair. Now and again he would pause and look at the boat-house or dancing pavilion with an air of wonder and satisfaction. "Just" —as Old George put it to himself—"as though he were a kid and wanted to lick the new paint off it." For, certainly, Kitty's dance-house had begun to possess a bright green and white glamour, with the black roof over-

hanging it sufficiently at the eaves to give a shadow-band, and the new white floor showing through the squares of the panels of green treillage. And Alex was thinking—"If I were Kitty—I'd have purple curtains. That would make a good colour scheme, white, green and purple. And the garden umbrellas ought to be yellow." Meanwhile he had finished creosoting the first lot of floor-boards, and like a hungry bird was calling for more. Old George supplied him. But the child was full of questions.

"I say, when it rains and blows—won't the dancing floor get wet?"

"O, we've got shutters to bolt over the panels."

"I see. What's that you're making, George?"

"A garden table. She wants a dozen to dot about the place. I've made three. The next job will be to paint 'em."

"Couldn't I do that?"

"Don't see why you shouldn't, sir. Two good coats over an undercoat."

"What colour?"

"White tops and green legs."

"Is painting difficult, George?"

"Not when you've got the hang of it, sir, and have learnt to be a bit bold with your brush. Most amateurs start as though the brush were going to bite 'em. They finnick about with it, and try to smear the paint on like gum."

"A bold and dashing style is better, George, what?"

"When you've earned the right to be bold, sir."

Vine Cottage dined at half-past twelve, and Kitty was frying half a dozen sausages when she heard the scullery door thrown open. There were sounds of someone and something coming in, bumpings, manœuvrings, a creaking of springs. She left the gas-stove for a moment, taking her frying pan with her, and saw through the doorway Alex adjusting his chair so that he could reach the brass taps over the sink.

"It's me——"

Which was obvious, as obvious as his bad grammar and the enterprise of the moment, and his inability to reach the soap dish which was attached by a nail to the tiled wall. She went in and placed a cake of yellow soap within his reach.

"Can you manage, boy?"

"Rather. This chair's lovely. Right—I can get at the towel. I say—that smells good."

"Sausages, real vulgar sausages and mashed potatoes."

"Splendid."

"And a suet pudding and treacle."

"I've a hunger. I say—I can wheel myself up to the kitchen table. Save a lot of trouble. You won't have to carry things about."

She returned with her frying-pan to the gas-stove, and they talked to each other through the open doorway to the accompaniment of splashing water and sizzling sausages.

"What have you been doing, boy?"

"Creosoting floorboards."

"Have you?"

"And I'm going to paint the garden tables. I say—the dancing pavilion looks lovely. Black and white and green. I've been thinking about the colour of the curtains."

"O! What's your taste?"

"Purple. A good rich purple."

She stood with her head slightly tilted, turning sausages with an attentive fork.

"Purple? That's it—absolutely it. Clever boy! Believe you've more idea of colour than I have. I'm too fond of pinking things."

"I say—that's sporting of you, Kit."

"Why?"

"Taking suggestions."

"Isn't it a partnership? We are doing it together."

"You're a dear. And about the garden umbrellas."

"Yes."

"Seems to me they ought to be yellow."

"Then we'll have them yellow."

III

The April sunlight pouring in, lit up all that end of the kitchen table where these two sat opposite each other, enjoying those nicely browned sausages. Alex was hungry, and in appreciating his hunger and the way in which he was disposing of the food she had cooked Kitty felt

possessed by a sense of security. Life was a solid business, as solid as suet pudding, but it had to be nicely cooked. Her ideals rested upon a foundation of sound, material facts, but given her foundations she could spread a surprising pair of gossamer wings. For, to a woman matter is both matter and symbolism, and Kitty, feeling the sun on her tawny head and being aware of the disappearance of those sausages, became conscious of her throne. Here and now was her opportunity, the moment of the making of a notable gesture. Five minutes ago her head had been empty of any such thought, but here were the facts, the points of attachment for the main threads of her web.

She said: "Alex, we ought to let your mother know."

She had surprised him. He put down his knife and fork and looked at her across the table. A moment ago he had been a simple creature placidly eating.

"Let her know?"

She nodded. She had a smooth, sleek air. One side of her round face flowed in the sunlight like the sunward half of an apple.

"Why not?"

His face had lost its look of physical contentment. He had become self-conscious. His next glance at her was upward, tentative, slightly anxious.

"But need we?"

She placed another sausage on his plate.

"Isn't it—inevitable? Besides—we have nothing to fear. She must be trying to find out. Much more dignified for us——"

He seemed to crouch slightly in his chair. His silence had a kind of breathlessness. His eyes had grown very dark, as though they were absorbing some new impression of her.

"You'll let her come here—and see me?"

"Of course——"

"After the way——?"

"Well—I owe it to myself—and to you."

He went on with his dinner, but it was obvious to her that he was consuming other food. And he was silent. He allowed her to change the plates, and to place a wedge of pudding before him. She pushed a glass dish filled with golden syrup within his reach, and he stared at it for a moment before dipping a spoon.

"I'd much rather she didn't come."

"So would I. But then——"

He held the spoon over his plate and let the syrup loop itself in patterns over the pudding.

"I haven't forgiven her yet. She—she was ready to make a rotter of me. I've been seeing things—rather clearly, Kit. It's pretty awful to have to think such things about one's mater—— I'd like to forget——"

She was watching him with an inward, consoling smile.

"So we can. What does it matter—now? One burns or buries one's rubbish, boy. Let's get it over."

His face expressed sudden relief.

"Yes, let's get it over. But I must say—it's jolly fine of you, Kitty. Shall I write, or will you?"

"I'll write. I'll ask her to come and see us."

"By George," said he suddenly, jabbing at his pudding; "if you had wanted to give her one back."

She reached for the golden syrup.

"Sometimes—one does—without wanting to—— How's the pudding? I'm a little out of practice with my puddings."

IV

Mrs. St. George brooded for two days over Kitty's letter. It said so little, and it said so much, but had Alex's mother been a woman with any sense of humour, or one capable of giving way to a generous impulse—she would have felt less inwardly ravaged. She had been made to appear ridiculous. She could neither laugh, nor weep, nor swear. Though inwardly and violently raging she had to button herself up against ridicule, against the inquisitive glances of her servants, and the complacent curiosity of her friends. Only to herself could she let herself go, and she did let herself go. In the privacy of her own mind she behaved like a dishevelled fury. She saw in that letter of Kitty's nothing but the gesture of a gloating little housemaid stretching out a hand to the vanquished. A little, butter-headed thing being melodramatically magnanimous! And that sly and succulent old mother sniggering down her broad nose! Vulgar people, impossible people, triumphant people!

Refusing ridicule, she had to consume her own anger. She could sack Leaper and Sandys, and she did sack them; she hastened to inform the police that she had troubled them unnecessarily. She could produce dew upon the polite forehead of Dr. Dazely. He offered her bromide both in a bottle and in his sympathy, and she would accept neither. She said: "I shall keep my boy's room just as it is. He may need it when that girl has reduced him to—a state—of degradation."

Dr. Dazely made suave noises.

"I suggest that he still needs treatment. I should be quite willing——"

But his blandness had ceased to be of use. She gave him one of her effacing stares.

"No, no interference, please. I have tried. Let him explore the alternative."

Certainly she was a woman of remarkable consistency, though to any other woman a man less bland than Dr. Dazely might have exclaimed: "Drink your medicine, dear lady, drink it down and have done with it. The bitterer the pill——"

She did not reply to Kitty's letter. She was in no fit temper to reply to it. She felt dishevelled after the icy blowing of her rage, and she knew the need of tidying her hair and composing her blue glances. As to going to see these two at their cottage at Shelford—well—such a visit would have to be reconnoitred. She found herself in an absurd and a monstrous dilemma. She had assured her son that he had married a harlot, and her son had gone back to his harlot.

Yes, dignity and yet more dignity. It would not do for her to allow that her glass case had been broken. She must look in her mirror and consider the distinctions of the woman of the world. She would assume the dignity of a too-devoted mother, and having dressed herself in this pose she went out to meet the world. She processed with the same rigid back, and the same blue glare in her eyes. She appeared at committee meetings; she was seen at the theatre, and driving in her car with a newly-engaged chauffeur at the wheel. She made a point of visiting people whom she knew were eager to snigger, and she effaced the veriest incipience of a snigger. She wrote to the various Smythes and St. Georges, giving them

the impression that she was letting youth have its way, but that she remained the mother in the background.

She left Alex's room untouched. She made a point of using it herself, and receiving people in it. She sat in her chair like a woman of glass. To the people who wished to see her wounded—and thay were not a few—she displayed a cool, calm candour.

"My son is living with his wife. They have a little place on the river. But I like to keep this room—just as it is——"

She implied that some day he would need it and her, though had she been a woman with any emotional facility she would have packed half the contents of the room into a van and sent them down to Vine Cottage. He needed them now. But she did not send him so much as a pair of trousers. With one movement of the hand she could have responded with human gesture to that letter of Kitty's. She had her chance and missed it, because she was determined to remain dangerous to Kitty. She would accept no judgment of Solomon.

She persisted in believing all that she wished to believe, and her opinion of Kitty and of No. 7 Vernor Street had not changed one iota. She had suffered a defeat, but she still had resourses. And at the end of a week of public parades, and a calculated flouting of her own world's inclination to think of her as "Poor Clare St. George," she went to see her lawyer.

V

Every case should have its nice point, but the point of Mrs. St. George's argument shaped itself rather like a cypher, and old Test, pushing out his lips and sucking them in again, admitted that there was nothing to be done.

"You've no case, no case at all. Obviously."

Mrs. St. George was quite aware of the fact that she had no case. It was superfluous of Mr. Test to point out to her that if there had been irregularities in the young person's past—he emphasized the "if"—Alex had condoned them. He was living with his wife. He had every right to live with his wife. It was a proof of social virtue.

And then that long sly mouth of Mr. Test's curled itself expressively, and his eyes glimmered at Mrs. St. George.

"By the way—what are they living on?"

"Not on me. Alex may have a little money at his bank. It won't last long."

Mr. Test seemed to snap his eyelids under his arched grey eyebrows. The facial movement said "Exactly." He smiled at Mrs. St. George; she amused him; her ruthlessness had a fascination. He picked up the trend of her schemings.

"The wife wrote to you."

Mrs. St. George produced Kitty's letter, and after reading it, he sucked in his long lips. He considered it to be a very proper letter. But—then—of course no statement could be accepted on its face value. You searched for the ulterior motive.

"She holds out a hand. A conciliatory letter. Which means—or should mean—that her position is not quite so strong as it appears to be."

He gave Mrs. St. George one of his rogue's glances.

"Funds—eh—funds! That's it—probably."

CHAPTER XXVII

I

Each generation may throw down some of the fences erected by its fathers. "O, humbug," and there is a push of the foot, and youth takes a short cut, while elderly people talk of Bolshevism and the decay of manners. Not that the short cut may get youth there, but it is youth's way, and Dr. Gordon Drake's short cuts were sometimes embarrassing. They cut across the formalities and social delays. He had no use for door-bells, or knockers and sulky servants. He walked in.

He would pull up that little grey car of his, slam the door, walk rapidly on his short, busy legs across a pavement or up a garden path, and push in. He appeared suddenly in bedrooms with a kind of cheery ruthlessness that ignored the set of a lace cap or the disorder of a dressing-table. He appeared there in the Vine Cottage kitchen when Kitty was rolling out pastry and dusting it from a flour dredger. He gave her a nod and a smile.

"Hallo—I see you've got him going."

No doubt she had. For Alex could be seen through the kitchen window, seated in his chair on the grass, with a paint pot ingeniously slung over a forked stick, a sack over his knees, and one of old George's garden tables nicely placed. Brush in hand he was painting the top of the table, bending forward, and completely absorbed in the work.

"O, yes, he's splendid. I knew he would be."

She and Dr. Drake might belong to the same generation, but the fences that a woman penetrates may not be those that are chosen by a man. It is possible that a woman is more cautious and more subtle in her penetrations. And Kitty gave Dr. Drake a glance that had a gleam of sacred fire in it. It was both defensive and aggressive; it warned the world that though she had had cause to pity her husband no one else had or should have

the right to do so. A man's pride and hers were realities.

"You do hate ringing bells," said she.

Dr. Drake observed her with his air of whimsical and ruthless good humour.

"Wastes time. People want to be so confoundedly private. But you have been doing some suggesting."

She gave him a veiled look. "What's that?"

"Stimulation—unadvertised, a tot of rum in the tea."

"I don't believe in spirits."

He replied with a faint smile. He might be as sharp as a scalpel, but his very sharpness cut so quickly through some of the fine tissues of life that he sometimes failed to observe them. But he could admire this sturdy little woman with her warm throat and her fearless dark eyes. It is possible that he thought her much too good for her mate.

"Everything all right?"

"Quite," said she.

"I'll go out and have a word with him."

"Do."

He went out into the garden, and she heard the two voices, Alex's boyish and a little excited, Drake's deliberate and faintly superior. She turned to look. Drake was bending forward to examine the top of Alex's table.

"Quite professional, my lad, quite professional."

And Kitty gave a little scowl at his flat and self-confident back.

"Damn you, don't treat him like a child."

No one heard her, and as she watched the two men she realized that Alex was not conscious of being treated like a child, and something that she had always known about him seemed to become more vividly known. It evoked a spasm of tenderness. The real Alex, the Alex of Maleham, and of that paint pot was a very lovable creature. Dr. Gordon Drake might be as efficient as hell, but it was a cold hell. And she smiled.

For Alex had put his brush into the paint pot, had backed his chair away from the table, and was trundling himself in the direction of the dancing pavilion.

"Come on, doc. I'll show you."

And Dr. Gordon Drake was following him rather with the air of one humouring a child. Kitty, stroking her

cheek, left a dusting of flour upon it. The ruthless realist was not laughter proof, nor was his hair so sleekly groomed that it could not be tweaked. For somehow —to the young wife at the window the child in Alex laughed at the topical droll hardness of the other man. Youth can be alive and impudently alive. There is a difference.

Which carried the day on to Mrs. Sarah, and an afternoon train from Waterloo, a Mrs. Sarah who joined Alex in the garden and joined in this game, not trespassing upon his sand-castle, but spading away at one of her own. She put on a pair of spectacles; and with a rug over her knees, hemmed tablecloths. They got on capitally together, while Kitty went out and did some shopping, for Mrs. Sarah had discovered the secret of eternal youth.

Though, had she applied herself to putting her wisdom into writing, her aphorisms might have lost some of their expressiveness.

Perfume, appetite, taste, desire. Yes, that elusive yet essential perfume that is dissipated so easily, especially in cities. The impulse to bury your nose in any bunch of flowers. But—always—a tantalizing incompleteness, a few grapes bobbing out of reach.

"The shop window, my dear, and a fur coat at fifty guineas, and three and sevenpence in your purse! Only don't get nasty about it. Get going." Or "Salmon at so much a pound, and you—going home with a couple of kippers. But meaning—some day—to get the salmon."

Yes, that was what Mrs. Sarah symbolized, a healthy body from the country, an eternal desire for something or other, a wholesome hunger that is never surfeited. And when you grew a little stout and short of breath, happiness could be found in desiring other things, different things, perhaps things for your children or your friends, and in making a back for the youngsters to climb on. Though not too much of a back. Youngsters should get scratched in gathering their own blackberries.

And here was English Kitty getting things, and luring her lad after her to play the great game of getting and living!

Mrs. Sarah, squinting down her broad nose, threaded

a needle, and then glanced at Alex's table, and praised its new glossiness.

"I always did like the smell of paint."

"Did you?"—and he dipped a brush.

"Makes me feel young. Paint pots come out with the spring, and so do wallflowers. That's a nice green."

"Yes, isn't it. The legs are a bit of a business. What I do is—paint the top first, and let it dry, and then I turn the thing upside down on a box."

"Nothing like using your wits, my dear."

For Alex was using his wits, and if more of the post-war neurasthenics had had Kitties to stimulate them, the failures would have been less dismal and less obvious. He was discovering a multitude of jobs. He cleaned knives, boots, silver, saucepans; he washed up dishes, peeled potatoes, and split firewood. Kitty had discovered him trundling about with a carpet-sweeper, and he most ingeniously contrived to make his own bed.

"I say—Mrs. Sarah——"

"Yes, my dear."

"I find I've got over three hundred pounds at Cox's. That's going to be a help, isn't it?"

"Of course, my dear."

"I want to back Kitty up—for all I'm worth."

"Well, you're doing it. Keep smiling my dear. People don't smile half enough, you know."

He sat back to observe his table, and found it good.

"I say—it seems we are going to have trouble about getting those garden umbrellas."

"Think so——?"

"Kitty says—she's going to one of the stores next week. They ought to be yellow—a nice bright yellow. Show up well from the river, and make a nice colour scheme. I'm rather a knut on colour, Mrs. Sarah."

"You've got ideas."

"O, only bits of ideas. Kitty's got the brain—I mean—for managing and looking ahead. Isn't she a wonder?"

"She's happy," said Mrs. Sarah.

Alex, lifting the paint pot to him, and stirring the paint with a stick, looked very gravely at its greenness.

"You really think she is——? I'm such a responsibility—— But—I'm most awfully happy——"

"Go on like that, my dear."

He gave a flushed, shy, kindling glance.

"You've been awfully good to us—I can say things to you—somehow. O, and has Kitty told you about the china—the plates and cups—I mean—for the show?"

"No, not yet."

"We thought of having what they call cottage ware, cream coloured stuff with red cherries on it. Nice, and simple—but chic. Just a little original. The thing is to be rather original—isn't it? Makes people feel they are getting something a little unusual."

Mrs. Sarah crinkled up her nose.

"That's—it. You go on getting original ideas, my dear."

He blushed.

"Really? And—O—I say—I've got another idea. We are going to call our show 'Kitty's.' And I've thought of having a big notice-board put up somewhere down the river. Believe I could paint it myself—something like this—'Come and Dance at Kitty's at Shelford. Watch for the Yellow Umbrellas.'"

"That's a very good idea," said Mrs. Sarah. "Watch for the yellow umbrellas. That's the touch! Bless you; isn't life a game!"

II

The vicissitudes of that first post-war spring were not unlike the moods of the men who returned to a land that was not full of heroes. If the voice of the yellow dog was heard in it, and the snarl of the ex-munitioneer, the weather, too, had its wild moments. Snow on the chestnut blossom and on the young green of the year. A howling blizzard in May.

But Alex went on with his painting, just as Kitty went on with her cooking and her cleaning and her planning. If it rained, Alex trundled himself into the completed dance-house, and with papers spread on the new floor, continued to paint a whole family of garden tables, chairs and benches. He had developed a passion for painting everything and anything. Mrs. Sarah declared that he was longing to repaint Old George.

"Never you mind, my dear. It's going to be a great time for talkers. You get on with the job."

She had a curious and human understanding of the world situation, and not as it was staged at Versailles. She assured her intimates who came to gossip with her at No. 7 that the world was like a mob of boys let out of school. They wanted to play, while somebody else did the paying. Quite natural of course—but not business. Yes, and the loutish minded might want to play rather roughly, with no rules to the game, and be ready to foul kick the other fellow if the other fellow appeared to be the possessor of a better pair of boots.

Well, let 'em play. If there had to be a post-war madness, the madder it was—the sooner it would be done with. Men might be fools, but on the whole they were rather decent fools, especially in England. If you could manage to suppress the foul kickers on both sides—— Meanwhile, the world would want to rush to the river and the roads and the sports grounds and the dancing-floors, and Kitty—with some prescience—had erected her booth beside one of the paths that might be chosen by the rushing herd.

But April had washed her face early and assumed a smile on the day when Mrs. St. George ordered out her car and drove down to Shelford to spy out the land. She might visit Vine Cottage, and she might not. She came to gather impressions. Her man, judging himself to be in the centre of Shelford when he saw the Ship Inn and the church, turned his car into Abbot's Close and pulled up beside the pollarded lime-trees. He left his seat and opened the door.

"Shelford, madam."

Mrs. St. George descended. She was in black. A sentimental person might have seen in her a woman about to visit a grave.

"You can wait here, Barter."

"Yes, madam."

A man in a white apron was painting the rectory gate. Mrs. St. George crossed the road and asked to be directed to Vine Cottage, and was told to take the first turning on the left, but before taking it she strolled down Limes Walk to the river. She stood and looked at the river. It was crimped with sunlight and wind dappled, and it made a prattling against the black side of the ferry-boat that lay at the ferry steps. The trees were filling with young

green. An idle fellow was throwing a stick for an eager, yelping retriever who disturbed Mrs. St. George's dignity by coming and shaking himself within a yard of her person. Even the post-war dogs had neither manners nor consideration.

She turned and walked slowly down the lane. She looked at the little old red houses, cottages and shops, so individual and so English, and at the trees and the flowering shrubs sunning themselves above the red brick walls of the three Georgian houses whose gardens came down to the Lane. She had occasional glimpses of the river. The fruit trees in the orchard opposite Vine Cottage were breaking into blossom. A weeping willow in the garden next to Kitty's home spread like a fountain of pale gold.

Mrs. St. George had come to Vine Cottage. She read the name painted in white letters on the green door in the garden wall. She walked deliberately as far as the shop window. The white blind was down, and two or three decrepit flies—survivors of the winter—were crawling on the white surface. She looked at the fascia board above the shop window and in fresh white lettering she read the inscription "Kitty."

She stared very hard at it for some seconds. Her blue eyes had a deliberate, cold brightness. So this was the place! It included a shop, an unopened shop, Kitty's shop. Another argument—perhaps? A hint—a suggestion? But why not "Kitty St. George?" Was the St. George held nicely in reserve? There were the two doors offering to compromise with the visitor the glass-fronted shop-door screened by a white curtain, and the green door under the white hood of the porch.

Mrs. St. George thought it a poor, poky, little place tucked away in a lane! Yes, its pokiness was obvious, impudent yet apologetic. To Mrs. St. George, Vine Cottage seemed to stand like the conventional housemaid, making the most of a clean apron and a pert assertion of respectability. A flimsy place, a poor, thin little piece of bluff. And there was something in Clara St. George that exulted. If she had hoped—well—here was her hope, a thing of pasteboard that might be crumpled and pushed over. The other woman's defences? How flimsy! You maintained a chilly, staring silence until

such a moment as the apron should go up over the housemaid's head. You spoke calmly of a month's wages.

She glittered. She walked to the porch, and put a gloved finger on the black bell-push. She heard the burr of the bell somewhere in the interior of that impertinent little house. She smiled. She was conscious of a feeling of cold and delicate curiosity.

III

It happened to be on Monday morning, and Kitty had been at her wash-tub, and was putting the linen through the wringer when the bell rang. She said—"Damn." Monday morning is always Monday morning, and washing is washing, but she dried her hands on the roller towel, and went to the front door just as she was, in blue print frock and white apron. Her sleeves were rolled up, and her hands and forearms retained the pinkness of the hot suds and water.

She opened the door and discovered Mrs. St. George.

Now, of the two faces, Kitty's was the one to change its expression. She had opened the door rather with the air of a busy young woman resenting interruption when the clothes line was waiting for her linen, but the substitution of one expression for another was so swift and so natural that Mrs. St. George was still registering conflicting impressions when Kitty spoke.

"Please come in. It's washing day, but I'm sure you won't mind. Alex is in the garden."

She stood to one side, smiling and holding the door open. Her eyes looked straight up and out at Mrs. St. George. She had the glow of the wash-tub upon her, and within her—under that perfect skin—other glowings. She showed to Mrs. St. George a compact and deliberate dignity, a surface that Alex's mother would prefer to have stigmatized as base metal—mere brass.

"I wondered when we should see you."

She shone, and the rays of her played upon Mrs. St. George's casket of glass. It was a peculiar moment for them both, charged with sudden self-realizations, a vivid piecing together of emotional fragments, a balancing of strains and stresses. Mrs. St. George glided into the passage, and as she did so she thought—"I'm welcome

here—for a reason! Now—shall we keep our masks on?" She looked along the length of cheap brown linoleum covering the passage floor. Kitty was closing the door. It seemed to her that she and Mrs. St. George were meeting on the beach of a desert island after a night of shipwreck had interrrupted them in the thick of a fine and strenuous quarrel. "Mrs. St. George—I believe ——?"—"Ah, how do you do. My daughter-in-law—I presume." They were both figures of glass suspended in mid air, and cushioned against clashings by a consciousness of previous impacts. Yes, there had been that interruption. Was it to be mutually and tacitly recognized?

"Please—excuse me."

Without any appearance of haste Kitty slipped past Alex's mother, and threw open the door of the sitting-room. It was the plainest and the least successful of her rooms, for she had economized in the furnishing of it in order that Alex's room might have the best that she could give. It was very much a second-hand room, full of bargains, though the curtains were bright and new.

"Please come in here."

She watched Mrs. St. George move down the passage. She was reminded of a woman of height and of social altitude walking down and out of a shop to a waiting car. She was made to feel that here were no commitments. The formalities were to be cherished. And so she let Mrs. St. George pass in, and closed the door, and turned an arm-chair—that was one of Mrs. Sarah's bargains—towards the light. Very deliberately Mrs. St George sat down in it—as though giving the chair time to hold its breath and bear the honour, while Kitty stood for a moment, aware of Alex's mother observing things as a certain type of woman observes them, without any appearance of troubling to observe. The very carpet, Axminster and second-hand, showed unashamedly a bold bare spot close to Mrs. St. George's toes.

"We are just straight. It was so difficult getting furniture. But we've managed."

She sat down on the loose-covered sofa, in the very middle of it and between two large pink roses, as though occupying the centre of her stage.

"Quite a nice bright view. And quite a good piece of garden."

Mrs. St. George's eyes looked through and beyond her.

"So I observe——"

"And above flood level. It really was rather a bargain. Shall I call Alex——?"

"Presently. So—you purchased——?"

"Yes. My mother advanced the money."

"Indeed."

"You see, she has some property."

There was a pause, and a pause that was deliberate on the part of Alex's mother. She sat very straight in her chair. She asked no questions, but she sat there like an interrogation framed in the flesh, judicial, an examiner, waiting for her son's wife to produce answers. She had known how to make many people feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. She could exert a silent pressure that squeezed from the more sensitive and less restrained nervous chatterings and explainings and excuses. Kitty should burst like a squeezed orange and extrude the pips and the juice. But Kitty continued to sit there in the middle of the sofa without any sign of responding to pressure or of being inconvenienced by it, her eyes fixed steadily upon Mrs. St. George's.

She said: "Yes, we are managing. I have a little money of my own, and Alex has a little. We are going to give teas and dances to river parties. And possibly I shall re-open the shop. Alex is getting on splendidly. His doctor is very pleased with him."

Mrs. St. George replied with a slight inclination of the head.

"Alex is there in the garden. He has a wheel chair now. If you stand up you will be able to see him."

Again there was a short pause, but Mrs. St. George did not move a muscle. It was Kitty who stood up.

"I'm sure you would like to speak with Alex alone. I have left my washing. It has to go through the wringer. Perhaps, while I'm finishing it you would like to go out into the garden."

She gave Mrs. St. George a confident smile.

"You don't mind, do you? I shan't be very long, but at present I haven't a girl to help me. The door at the end of the passage leads into the garden. These old places are full of doors."

IV

Mrs. St. George was left seated and alone. A woman of many isolations, loving her own cold self, she had never felt the need of people, nor wished to have them too intimately near her. She had resembled a white cat on a fur rug in front of her own fire. Or, life had been an ivory keyboard to be played upon with cold calm fingers, and always she had preferred to play music of her own composing. A most solitary woman, she had never known the snugness of true solitude, that aloneness with one's warm and purring self, but in that room of Kitty's she did experience what was for her a sense of isolation and of loneliness. She still wore her mask but beneath it there were quiverings, a shiver of chilly self-questioning. She had been bereft of something. This little, butter-headed thing had appeared so solid and confident, though this air of confidence might be bluff, the ostentatious opening of a door, a studied frankness. Kitty had appeared less flimsy than her house, a little stubborn creature warm with the warmness of her youth an its labours.

But teas provided for river parties! A shop! And her son?

And, suddenly, Mrs. St. George stood up; she walked to the window; her alert, hard eyes appeared to surround themselves with a number of fine lines. She saw her son. He was seated in his chair on the grass above the river, painting away at one of the many garden tables. He wore no hat. His back was turned towards the cottage.

Something stirred in his mother, a sudden cold passion to repossess, the same passion that had quickened in her when she had seen him lying like an idiot child in his bed at Poynter's Hill. She turned and going out into the passage, opened the garden door. She opened it very gently, and left it open behind her. She stepped on to the grass and went slowly down the gradual slope, noiselessly gliding.

V

Even a Mrs. St. George stores memories, and Alex's mother had one memory of her son's childhood that had

never failed to rouse in her a vague and resentful consciousness of life as a thing apart, a fluid substance that had slipped through her fingers. And now on this April day, her son behaved as he had behaved as a child, a child happily absorbed in some fascinating game of its own and resenting interruption. His mother's interruptions had signalled interference. She surprised the grown child. She saw him glance round and up at her with a quick frown of eagerness and fear, his eyes open very wide.

"Mater——!"

And then his face changed almost as quickly as Kitty's face had changed in the Vine Cottage doorway. It clouded over with a kind of brittle sullenness. He sat very still for a moment. Then he placed his brush carefully in the paint pot, raised himself up in his chair, and looked sideways at his mother's knees.

"Doing a bit of painting. Does Kitty know you're here?"

Mrs. St. George stood like Lot's wife. Once again she was being given her chance to liquefy herself, but there was that in her which was its own congealer. She looked down at her son's table as she had looked upon some of his toys.

"I have seen your wife. She asked me to come out. I am here to see——"

Her son looked up at her with a sudden blankness. It was as though many emotions moved in him, but not one of them could reach the surface and find expression. Or perhaps these many emotions neutralized each other. His face had a helplessly frozen look, and when he spoke it had the effect of stammering.

"Sorry—there isn't a chair. Won't you—call Kitty."

His mother's arms were rigid at her sides. Something was happening in her. One hand—the right—opened and closed its fingers with a slow, spasmodic jerkiness.

"Is there any need? I have come to see——"

His head jerked upwards. She saw his eyes alive with a sudden, vivid brightness.

"Mater, I'm awfully happy here—I've never been so happy before—— If you're worrying——"

The glass shell of her was starred and cracked.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I

MR. JERMYN ST. GEORGE was back in town with a chest as dry as his humour. When he walked into the smoking-room of "Hacketts," and found Thompson, the senior club-servant, tidying up the journals and magazines on one of the tables, Mr. Jermyn St. George experienced a very distinct thrill. Never had a man enjoyed life more astutely than he had. May was in Pall Mall, and Thompson, straightening up with a flash of brass buttons, smiled all over his wise round face at Mr. Jermyn St. George.

"Very glad to see you, sir."

He was glad, and so was Mr. Jermyn.

"Very glad to be back, Thompson. Any news?"

"Nothing of importance, sir. Sir Jonathan Crust's dead, sir."

"Ha—is he! Then—I shan't play musical chairs with him any more for that place by the window. And how are you, Thompson?"

"I am very well, sir."

"You always are—and you always look it."

Old Jermyn sat down in his favourite chair by one of the windows overlooking Pall Mall. It was earlyish, and the big room—empty and noiseless—and lined with books between its high windows, seemed to envelop old Jermyn with velvet arms. He stretched himself. His brick-red face, with its very white hair above its dark and mischievous eyes, expressed ironical contentment. He looked at the people passing on the opposite pavement. Somewhere a quill pen scratched soberly, a sound full of so many mellow associations that it fretted no old English nerves. He looked at the books, at the solid chairs and sofas tinted like old rust on a door hinge, at the central writing-table with its neat cases of club stationery, at the huge turkey carpet dimly glowing.

"Damn it," he thought "with care—I ought to have another ten years. Life's good."

He had the appearance of one of those man fated to live for ever. His red face, with its dark, jocund eyes, looked imperishable. He was still so full of amiable devilry. He could not resist the pulling of a leg, or even legs that were made to be looked at rather than to be pulled, and post-war England was developing the apotheosis of the leg.

"Glad I've lived long enough to see it. Youth's going to show us a few things."

He was full of chuckles, beneficient chuckles. Life had treated him well; it would have treated him kindly had he been a tramp. And he sat there and basked in the winter of his wellness, and saw the sunlight on the faces of the tall houses, and thought of the cigar he would smoke presently, and the people whom he would see. Yes, he was going to enjoy himself. Life still pulled.

There was young Alex——! And his mother! His mouth twisted itself humorously. He was the one St. George to whom Mrs. Clara had not communicated the news of her son's defection, but old Jermyn knew about it. He had a way of getting to know about everything. Certainly the details were not complete, but the filling in of the details would provide him with some nice amusement. He would go and hear for himself and see. Not that Clara would be pleased to see him. O, not at all! He had never treated her with what she had considered to be a proper respect. He had once told her that she had no sense of humour. Unforgivable frankness!

And Mrs. Sarah—and the young people? His jocund eyes twinkled at the thought of Mrs. Sarah! Assuredly he would stroll round after lunch when he had finished his cigar, and enjoy a gossip with that inimitable woman.

No. 7 Vernor Street was but a comfortable toddle, especially for an old buck who wore check trousers and a grey felt hat, and kept to the sunny side of the pavement. Old Jermyn had lunched well. His cigar had been a good one, and when he came to No. 7 and found Corah still serving behind the counter he felt that he had many years to live.

"Well, my dear, how's everybody?"

Everybody appeared to be in the best of health and in the best of tempers, and old Jermyn asked himself upstairs where Mrs. Sarah was reading a novel and eating chocolates out of a box. She put aside the novel, but

not the chocolates. She was in high humour; she was welcoming the one St. George who could enjoy a jest, and who had remained a bachelor. Mr. Jermyn understood the why and the wherefore of things.

He sat down as though sitting down in her presence was a sacred yet humorous act.

"Well—well—how's our little swashbuckler? I hear she has torn our little Alex out of the arms of 'Cardigan Square'."

Mrs. Sarah passed him the box.

"Have one."

"Dare I? But tell me all about it. I have been scenting something epic."

Mrs. Sarah could tell a tale, and to tell a tale to Mr. Jermyn St. George was an inspiration in itself. Beside, what a tale it was! He enjoyed the hearing of it almost as much as she enjoyed the telling of it; he sat there smiling like a gentlemanly old faun, his jocund eyes full of mischief; while his lean face seemed to grow more red under his very white hair.

"Kidnapped him—did she! Fancy kidnapping your own husband. Splendiferous! And what has happened since, alarums and excursions?"

He had to hear all about Vine Cottage, and Kitty's dance-house and Alex's jazz-band, and the yellow umbrellas, and all the adventurousness of a young wife with a husband tied to a wheeled chair. Old Jermyn enjoyed every bit of it. It was a great business. He seemed to hear the clash of cymbals and the rub-a-dub of a drum. He pulled droll and whimsical grimaces.

"Splendiferous! And how has the good lady taken it?"

Mrs. Sarah believed that Mrs. St. George had taken it very badly.

"You see, Mr. Jermyn, she went down there thinking she might find Alex in the mopes, and sighing for the flesh-pots. She found him as happy as a sandboy. By the way—what is a sandboy?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," said old Jermyn. "But I do know that I shall go down to Shelford to-morrow. When does Kitty's show start?"

"They are thinking of opening on the last Saturday in May."

"And what are you doing?"

Mrs. Sarah looked sly.

"Preparing a party. O—I can pull a few strings."

"I bet you can. Same here. The last Saturday in May. My dear lady, we must squeeze the grape. And I must charter a steamboat, or something. We must give them a send off. Why, it's a public duty, a salute to youth."

"So it is," said Mrs. Sarah. "It's nothing short of a revolution. A real, live St. George beating a drum!"

The heart of Old Mischief—as someone had christened him—was as sound as Alex's drum. On leaving No. 7 Vernor Street he had proposed returning to his club, but his puckishness intervening, he hailed a taxi and told the man to drive him to No. 77 Cardigan Square. He would call upon Clara St. George; she would give him tea, and indications. His eyelids narrowed over twinkling eyes. He felt moved to observe Clara, to peer at her from amid the leaves of his puckishness. Poor Clara, a woman who could with such cold consistency lie herself into so ironical a dilemma! But old Jermyn's dealings in mischief were not malevolent. He sat in the taxi, swaying slightly, his gloved hands resting on the silver top of his cane, his grey hat set at an angle. He had always said that good women were the very devil. They would try and lie you out of your own particular hell into their own particular heaven. But what a holy mess many of them made of their heaven! Poor Clara! Always she had appeared to be incapable of laughter, a woman who could not loosen her stays——

There had been times when Mr. Jermyn had felt actively venomous towards Clara. She had mishandled men and things so cruelly. Never had she allowed her men to play. And now she was sitting alone at the foot of her North Pole in a little world of repressions, while the young life she had helped to create flowed apart through other and adventurous seas. The woman who had wanted everything for herself and who had got it—to a point, now was not wanted.

Platitudes! Were parents always to be big fools like their children? Pompous fools? Old Jermyn's eyes were not unkind, but he was full of curiosity, a humorous and prying Pan, piping his way through the woods, and throwing swift, pagan glances at all creatures that went naked, and loved to dance. What foolishness was cradled

when life refused to dance! Those rigid people, those correct and wickedly self-conscious people who would not or could not loosen their girdles! People whose mothers had worn bustles, and leg of mutton sleeves, and whose seemly skirts had brushed the pavements! Buttoned up people, obsessed by the eternal, uncompromising and egregious "I."

The taxi swerved towards the pavement below the solemn front of No. 77, and as Mr. Jermyn reached out a hand towards the window strap, a young thing went by with short skirts trembling above a pair of silk stockinged legs. And such legs!

Old Jermyn raised his hat to them.

"Salve—juventus——!"

Surely the Bishop's Apron was a flag that had been hauled down, and in its place the world would fly an audacious, scampering petticoat?

II

Mrs. St George was at home.

She did not pretend to pleasure at seeing Jermyn, but she gave him a cold hand. She received him in Alex's room, where the bed still stood covered by a black and gold silk quilt, and the long chair by the window and the gramophone and the banjo remained like the toys of a dead child. The room and its contents provoked comment, but Mr. Jermyn made no comments, and asked no questions. He used his eyes. He observed the fire burning in the grate and his sister-in-law's chair drawn close to it, though the May sun was shining.

He sat down.

"Well, 'Dora' is not dead yet. How have you managed for coal?"

She made some very perfunctory reply to this very platitudinous question. She had never been able to understand Jermyn's reputation for wit; she had failed to discover it; always he had talked to her as though he was cracking nuts and throwing the shells into the fire.

"Torquay appears to have suited you."

Jermyn had many things to say concerning the climate of Torquay. He could be as prolix as any club bore when

he pleased. Meanwhile, he was observing his sister-in-law. She was different; she was as rigid as ever, but with the rigidity of a woman who had been ill. She gave him the impression of a woman who had had something broken inside her, and who was afraid to move lest the cracked pieces should fall apart. And she looked cold, physically cold; she sat close up to the fire, and unconsciously she would stretch out her hands to it. Old Jermyn was reminded of his own description of her as a woman with an electric bulb installed inside her in lieu of a heart. And the glass bulb had been cracked!

He was conscious of a feeling of pity.

For, damn it, the woman was lonely, with a horrible, inhuman loneliness. There was no doubt about it. The very room shivered, and that empty bed and the forsaken toys were full of frozen pathos. What a mess she had made of things! She had concocted her freezing mixture, and here she was dabbling her own cold feet in it.

He could not help glancing at that bed and that chair, and she was very well aware of his glances. She said—"I prefer to keep the room as it was."

Old Jermyn felt his heart give a kind of jerk, but before he could make any answer a maid appeared with the tea-tray. It was arranged before the fire between them, and Mrs. St. George's precise hands became occupied with its contents. Her eyes looked less blue; almost they were the eyes of an old woman, dulled and dimmed. She seemed to have lost some of her cold, staring self-confidence.

"O—these servants!"

The girl had forgotten the sugar, and the voice of Clara St. George betrayed an unexpected querulousness. Old Jermyn was startled. Never before had he discovered querulousness in her. Always she had been so decisive and so sure.

He got up and rang the bell.

"Now that the war is over—we forget things. There will be a regular stampede to forget certain things. But not sugar—as a rule."

Her face remained chilled and peevish.

"There's no gratitude," she said.

"What is gratitude?"

His jocund eyes challenged her with whimsical kindness, but she was away wandering in her own sleety world,

and when the maid came in she spoke to her with a kind of absent curtness.

"Sugar—Thomas."

The girl's face was sullen.

"Holy Christopher!" thought old Jermyn, "will this woman never learn how to ask for sugar, or how to get it?"

He sipped his tea, and thought of Alex, and wondered whether his sister-in-law would speak of her son and of that little menage down at Shelford. Why couldn't she let things out, loosen the girdle? These matriarchal women! And to his surprise she did let things out, but only certain things, and she let them out in her own way. She was falsely frank. She still persisted in twisting the realities. She made a display of being impersonal, and behind it her personal persistence loomed like a stark white cliff.

She said: "I realize that Alex must explore the alternatives. I'm allowing him that. I dare say you have heard a good deal. I would rather not discuss the possibilities. Men are such creatures of impulse. Sex—you know. It has always seemed to me so—so very unpleasant. One would have preferred to have saved him the experiment."

Old Jermyn stirred his tea.

"My God, woman," he thought; "what is life but an experiment?"

But when he left her he went back to his club and sat in a chair in the silent, sombre library and looked out at the green lilacs and the budding plane-trees in the Carlton gardens. He had brought away with him an impression of Clara St. George that was like a thin perfume clinging to his consciousness, an unpleasant perfume. He sniffed it reflectively. Like many other scents, it evoked memories, suggestions, associations of ideas in time and place. It led him towards the inwardness of that lonely woman, and in the dimness he thought that he could distinguish her fundamental outlines. Yes, she was like a fundamentalist driven to the last ditch, incapable of surrender or of compromise, still furiously determined to dominate and to possess. She would hurl all the old and the new invectives—"Heretic"—"Blasphemer"—"Atheist"—"Corrupter of Youth"—"Materialist"—"Free Lover"—"Anarchist"—"Bol-

shevist." She wanted to see all newness fail, to censor it off the earth.

"By Jove! that's it," he thought; "she's waiting to see these young things fail. She's praying for them to fail. She's watching for their little ship to split upon the rocks."

Old Jermyn was sure of it. It was to be her show or nobody's. Her hands were ready to clutch and to hold. The little ship of youth might founder. Perhaps there would be a cry for help, perhaps not. But she would be there, ready to pounce upon her opportunity. It might be that she would regain control, or a kind of control that would satisfy her egotism. She might be able to humiliate those other women.

Yes, she was like the rest of them, the popes, the priests, the academic people, the little prigs of schoolmasters. She wanted to cry—"My show, hands off it," and to make of her "show" a little state religion or a professional monopoly. She wanted to play Joshua. She wanted to take life and youth and to suppress in them all those vital and insurgent forces that boil upwards, and while doing it to assume that the right and the duty were wholly hers. All other people were poisonous charlatans, outsiders, frequenters of swill-tubs. She had the eyes of the wilfully blind. She refused to look into the streets or the dormitories or the kitchen or the workshop. She was like your supersurgeon who has no use for anything but to cut it out. She would have removed sex as she would have removed the vermiform appendix.

Old Jermyn stretched out his legs, and tweaked the knees of his trousers.

Yes, it was essential that Kitty's little enterprise should not fail. It must not fail. For youth goes over the top and carries the lines of the future.

"Dash it," he said to himself; "didn't Clara give him a body when she bore him? And aren't our bodies as—inevitable—as our souls? Man might be as essentially clean as the animals—but for the repressionists. Paul, and all the pedagogues, and the academic prigs! For ever messing about with gloved fingers, and holding their noses, and sprinkling things with disinfectants. Makes me think of those stuffy old sick-rooms when they used to shut all the windows and splash carbolic about. We may not have the Victorian's moral drive—whatever

that was—but hang it—I do think we're more honest."

III

But in his study of the fundamentalist in Mrs. St. George old Jermyn had not exhausted her possibilities, or got quite to the root of things. His reading of her was incomplete, which was not surprising, for Clara St. George was realizing tendencies—cravings in herself that were unexpected.

She was rather like a woman in her nightdress walking about a cold and empty house at three o'clock in the morning. She was realizing the house's emptiness, the thinness of the garment that she wore, and the impersonal deadness of the furniture. Possibly she had knocked her shins against sharp edges. But the chill was upon her, a human shiver, a gradual appreciation of the fact that she was alone, utterly alone, and that no one would come to her. She might cry out and ring bells, but the house would remain empty and silent.

She had insisted on living in this house in her own way, like a schoolmistress, and youth had fled from it. She was not wanted. She was not necessary.

Yes, she was waiting for Kitty to fail; she prayed—if prayer is selfish desire—for those two young things to fail. She was ready to do anything that might force them upon the rocks. She wanted to see youth helpless and at her mercy, because—in her cold and chilly craving—she wanted youth back in her house. She was face to face with that most ghastly of ghosts, that is also the most terrifying of realities—the knowledge that she was necessary to no one.

For then—a woman suddenly feels old, and hears in her empty house footsteps—other footsteps. Death is on the stairs.

IV

Meanwhile, old Jermyn went down to Shelford and saw his young things at work. Shelford had grown green. Trees threw flickering green reflections upon the river; the horizon, deep with the year's mystery, seemed to

gather about youth and its doings like the trees of a wood. Fruit blossom dropped on the grass. Red tulips stood jaunty and straight, and wallflowers let their perfume drift over the blue of the myosotis. The buds were big on the vine, Old Jermyn felt warmed by the sun. Always —at this season of the year when the cuckoo began to call he would think of old Chaucer and the Pilgrims— "When April with his showres soote." Silly old cuckoo, beloved cuckoo! Why quarrel with the ingenious and questionable proclivities of the bird? Things happen because they happen. Why go about like a little fussy old maid of a schoolmaster trying to rap life over the knuckles with a ruler? "The cuckoo is a reprehensible and unsocial bird, my boys. Don't ask about the egg. Eggs are products that should interest us only at the breakfast-table. All other eggs are addled. They are —because I say so."

Old Jermyn chuckled.

He found young Alex blowing toots on a clarinet. He had bought a clarinet. He was practising on it, preparing for ragtime. Also, he had a drum and a pair of cymbals.

Kitty was unpacking crockery, those cream-coloured cups and saucers and plates with red cherries on them, fit for any blackbird to peck at.

Old Jermyn became absorbed into the adventurousness of Vine Cottage. Stay to lunch? Of course he would. He was going to stay all day. He sat and tapped Alex's drum, while Alex attempted a fox-trot on the clarinet, and did not attempt it so badly. But the dance-pavilion was the Hall of the gods, with its white walls and green treillage and purple curtains, and its brown border to its polished floor.

"That's one of my jobs—polishing," said Alex; "I trundle up and down in my chair with a polishing mop."

Old George was sent to fetch the gramophone with its big green trumpet. The music was turned on. Old Jermyn slithered a few steps, and then caught hold of Kitty.

"Uncle hasn't danced for years."

He bobbed up and down with Kitty, bending his knees in the old style, his jocund eyes dancing also in his very red face. He got out of breath.

"By Jove!" he said—"By Jove! Silly old cuckoo!"

Everything was shown to him, and everything explained. Old Jermyn had an eye for colour and for atmosphere; at one period of his life he had collected pictures—English water-colours—and he suggested that he should like to get a glimpse of Shelford and of Vine Cottage from the river. Kitty's punt and a skiff were lying at the new landing-stage that Old George and his jobbing friend had erected, and Kitty took Mr. Jermyn out in the skiff, for she still felt amateurish when handling a punt-pole. She sculled well into mid-stream, and kept the skiff in position with an occasional movement of the sculls. Mr. Jermyn, with the rudder-lines under his arms, surveyed Vine Cottage and its garden. The yellow umbrellas had been erected and the green and white tables arranged as for a dress rehearsal.

"We like our colour instant and vivid, my dear, these days. You've got it."

"That's Alex," she said; "I should have gone wrong with the umbrellas and the curtains. He and Old George —our man—have been working out colour schemes for the garden. That's our shop window—you know."

"Of course," and old Jermyn twirled one of the rudder-lines like a boy swinging a chestnut on a string; "you have to catch the eye, and you do. The red brickwork of the cottage, and the green sweep of the grass. The yellow dots of the umbrellas. And then—your dance-room, black and white with its touches of purple and green, under the massive green of these old chestnuts. You catch the eye at once—and please it. What about the garden?"

"Red geraniums and lobelia in great splashes."

"My word! That's——"

"So Alex says—Victorian. But there are reasons. You want something vivid, he says, and as Old George says—something that goes on blooming. It is going to cost us rather a lot, but Old George is raising the lobelia in a little house he has—— George is a treasure."

"Are you going to have a board up?"

"Yes, by the chestnuts. And two other boards, one above and one below the village. I've arranged that. Alex's idea. 'Come and dance at Kitty's.'"

Old Jermyn nodded.

"Row me down-stream—a little way, will you?"

She sculled him as far as Shelford Park, where the beech-trees were coming into leaf, and Mr. Jermyn's dark eyes glanced hither and thither, but he remembered to steer. The river seemed to swell like soft and liquid glass, and he felt the sun warm on his knees, and heard a cuckoo calling in the green valley.

"England," he thought, "and these young English, the new English—God bless them!"

And then he asked Kitty a question.

"What about the band?"

She sculled gently, her eyes on his face.

"We are doing the best—we can. Alex is so keen——"

"The band's important—very. You know how pick-some people are. And your show—must be——"

Her eyes seemed to darken a little.

"We've talked it over. We could hire a piano. Alex would have liked a piano and violin, and he could vamp in with the drum and cymbals, and a banjo or clarinet. But—then—you see——"

"Look here," said old Jermyn, twiddling a rudder-line; "you ought to have a real good little band for week-ends. The gramophone might do for casual people on other days. Suppose I supply a piano fellow and a violinist for the season. I dare say I could get hold of them in town, and they would have to come down and practise with Alex——"

He smiled at her shrewdly under his white eyebrows.

"You mean it——?"

"Of course."

She let her right scull float, and held out a hand to him.

"You are the only one of the family—who seems to understand——"

"My dear—I'm not to be thanked. This show of yours isn't an ordinary show. It's——"

His thin old hand grasped her young one.

"It's—a bit of heroism."

CHAPTER XXIX

I

THERE were moments when Alex sat in his chair in the garden, and forgot his paint-brush or his ragtime, and allowed his thoughts and glances to wander where they pleased. The world had changed for him, not only because the sun shone strenuously during those May days, but because he was different and saw things differently. For fear had gone out of him, the fear that makes a man restless and furtive, and too talkative or too silent. His eyes seemed to have sunk back into his head. Kitty had noticed what she would have described as the deepening of his eyes. He looked at the world about him as though he could look at it calmly and without hurry, and like a child whose confidence has been restored, and who has learnt to know that the voices of the interferers and the repressionists will not be raised to spoil his game. There was no schoolmaster to cry, "St. George, what are you doing? Wasting your time! Stand up and construe this passage." He had a curious feeling of having found himself, the intimate, real self that had been hiding in shrubberies and dark corners. Or, he had been playing a game of hide-and-seek with the world, and Kitty had run out from somewhere and caught him.

He had a new sense of security. This little world was so real—real grass, real water, real trees and flowers. He had begun to love it, both as a child and as a man. All the details of life had become so full of absorbing interest, of adventures, ingenuities, triumphs, little excitements. It was an adventure to discover some way of doing a thing that had appeared impossible, especially with such a fellow-enthusiast as Kitty, who made him feel that she was saying—"Boy, that's splendid." Even his love had changed. It seemed to grow more deep and wide-eyed during that month of May; it was

unashamed devotion, a turning of the face to the beloved, to a little woman who seemed so warm and wise and steadfast that he was full of a devout wonder. He did not ask himself how or why it was possible; he lived with the consciousness that it was possible.

Besides, she was such a little bit of mischief. She didn't bore a fellow, or make him feel foolish. She liked doing things, and getting them done. Her eyes might look love, but, by George!—that bobbed head of hair of hers was crisp with common sense. She was a young woman who would not be afraid to smack her baby. She had no cant.

And there—was the river. In other days Alex had thought of the river—well—as the river, a generalized stretch of water, something that flowed, or upon which you floated. His acceptance of life had been as casual and as superficial as his acceptance of the river, but now he was sitting beside the river day by day, and discovering in it all manner of moods and variations, its changing sheens and flecks of colour and rufflings and responses. Its mood seemed infinite. Its life had a mysterious subtle texture, and yet always it was the river.

It taught him to observe, to infer, to question, and to think. It persuaded him to float, not upon a flux of day-dreams, but upon a river of reality. He felt that he was beginning to know a little, and to know himself in knowing it. It suggested life, the flow of experiences, reactions, impressions which make up consciousness. In looking at the river he began to look into the mirror of his own consciousness.

He discovered strange reflections, or reflections that seemed strange because of their freshness. He saw Kitty. She was like a big burr of yellow light, a kind of central radiance. He saw his mother—a thin and broken and wavering image, disturbed and disturbing. And in a vague way he began to see himself as he had been and as he was, and also his relation to other things. That is to say he was discovering "values," a word that he had picked up from an article in a magazine and which he had adopted. It sufficed him for the moment. Also —the "real," though when he tried to define the "real" he found himself in difficulties. All that he could say was that some conditions, feelings, impressions were more vivid and satisfying than others. The present

seemed to him so much more real than the past. There seemed to him to be a film of unreality overlying his schooldays, and his Oxford days. What was it? A film of convention? The unreflecting acceptance of a scheme, an order, a class mood? He had been a shadow at school, or perhaps—an automaton. There had been the proper thing to do and to say, the correct clothes to wear. Always there had been repression. If you were sensitive and queer, and you wanted to play a game of your own, then you were an outsider, contending against some social cult. And the upholders of the cult crushed you.

But here—at Shelford—playing this new game of life, he felt exquisitely free. Yes, in spite of his useless legs. Even a minus quantity appeared to have its value! Or was it that the something that you hadn't, inspired you to make more use and to obtain more delight from the something that you had? Your mind was free. Yes, he felt the intimate "I" of himself to be far freer. It had not been free at school, or at Oxford, or during the war. Always there had been—the repressionists. The world called it discipline. But was not the only discipline worth having that which you learnt to impose upon yourself, not the cult of a caste, but a way of life that was good for you; because it was good for you and for the people who mattered? He knew that if he hurt Kitty he would hurt himself. That was the beginning of his morality, or his religion. Not to refrain from doing a certain thing because the eternal schoolmaster orders you not to do it, but to find out for yourself why it should not be done. To forget the schoolmaster and to become yourself.

Sometimes he talked of these matters to Kitty, but Kitty was more interested in the concrete than in the abstract. She not only wanted to hit her ball, but to hit it in the right way, and Mrs. Sarah had been an admirable instructress. Theories of life did not appeal to her as did the practice of it.

"You've got to run your own show."

She was so full of frank—"I don't know"—or "Does it matter?" that Alex was forced to meet her on practical ground.

"But how did you learn things? You seem to have such a sense of value."

She would look at him with her steady, fearless eyes.

"Learn things——? Well, from mother mostly. Or worried them out myself. Doesn't one?"

"But—at school——"

"O—at school——!"

She appeared to retain a sturdy contempt for the school that had educated her.

"When you see the necessity——"

"Necessity——?"

"A piece of plate glass between you and something in the shop window you want. Nothing like that for setting your wits working. Was there anything at school you wanted—so badly—that you——?"

He laughed.

"Only—to get out of the class-room—mostly."

"Same here. Holidays were the times when I learnt things—the things that are of use. Mother would let me help in the shop. And I used to puddle about in the kitchen. And when you make a horrid sticky mess of your first cake—and try to eat it! Mother ate a slice of mine—— Jolly sporting of her. And after that—I had to conquer cake-making—or——"

"Die——!"

"Not quite die—my dear; have indigestion."

Always—they returned to the practical, though to a woman the doing of things may be symbolical, and Kitty—the utilitarian—might also be Kitty a pragmatical mystic. She, too, could stand and look down into the still water and see herself and Alex in it, but for the moment the thing that mattered was their show. You could not build nests in the air. Foundations. And after the foundations—elaborations. But she could understand the pathos of Alex's paralyzed legs, and applaud with tenderness his creating of a new mobility both of mind and of body. But would he always be paralyzed like this? Was it final? She had tackled Dr. Drake on the subject, and Dr. Drake's replies were guarded. "I'm watching him—— I'm not quite sure—yet."

Meanwhile, Vine Cottage showed great activity. Mr. Jermyn had found his musicians, ex-soldiers both of them, the pianist a little monkey of a fellow with an artificial leg, the violinist a tall fair boy who smiled whenever the violin was tucked under his chin. They

came down to Shelford to practise together. A hired piano had been installed in the dance-pavilion, and here Alex and his two assistants made music. They combined well. At the end of the week they were playing with dash and devilry, the ruffle-headed pianist bumping up and down in his chair, the violinist giving little jerks and swayings, Alex beating syncopations on his drum and breaking in with cymbals or banjo or clarinet. He had a very nice sense of time. Also—he had a voice—and would indulge in bursts of song.

"Plenty of devil—you chaps."

Sometimes Kitty would come in and try steps and judge the speed of their playing, and whenever she appeared Alex's band seemed to whip itself up for a spurt. Ragtime drifted alluringly over the river. Old George bedding out geraniums now that all danger of frost had passed, found himself showing a tendency to prod the earth with his trowel in time to the music. It was a merry noise.

And Kitty had found her strong girl—strong, but deft and comely—to help with the teas. They were to wear black, with jade-green aprons, black stockings and green shoes. Details mattered. And in a meadow above and in a meadow below Shelford men were erecting two big white boards facing the river—"Come and dance at Kitty's. Look for the Yellow Umbrellas."

Shelford gossiped not a little. It was critical and it shook a head. "That young woman at Vine Cottage—— Dances? Where are the people to come from? She ought to have tried this trick up at Maidenhead." Most of them were more or less sure that the young woman would fail, though she had a paralyzed husband to keep. Plucky of her—no doubt. But Shelford proposed to grant her one season, and at the end of it there would be yellow umbrellas for sale.

II

Meanwhile, in Mayfair Mrs. Sarah and old Jermyn were conspiring together.

Mrs. Sarah had put up a notice in her shop, and above it a coloured poster that she had found someone to paint

for her. You saw the river, and two people dancing, and two other people having tea under a yellow umbrella.

KITTY'S AT SHELFORD!

TAKE A BOAT OR A CAR AND DANCE THERE

SPECIAL ORCHESTRA AT WEEK-ENDS.

IT'S CHIC.

But Mrs. Sarah was more potent and persuasive than her poster. She entangled quite a number of her old patrons and talked them into sympathetic attention. Kitty was a plucky little beggar—by Jove! A paralyzed husband, an ex-officer! Yes, certainly—these two young things deserved encouragement. "Well, be a dear, and do it," was Mrs. Sarah's refrain. Also, accepting a hint, she made Alex draw a large-sized map of Shelford, showing the exact position of "Kitty's," and how to get there. It gave you the route by train, by river, and by road.

Old Jermyn—too—had his circle. Had he been a bore his circle might have resented his activities, but when old Jermyn said that a thing was good you had a feeling that it was good. He had a reputation. He was a complete worldling. He got hold of young this and young that, and he did not neglect the female element. "You make young Tom Somebody drive you down to Shelford. Good floor, good band. Quite an original sort of show. An ex-officer—with no legs—playing the drum."

But Mrs. Sarah and old Jermyn went beyond instigation. That first Saturday was to be the dramatic day. Not only must your shop have its window dressed, but it must be full of people. Start a crowd to attract a crowd. Play upon the imitativeness of the human animal. Persuade people to exclaim—"I say—that's a posh show. Look how it's going! Come along, let's cut in."

So, they conspired together. Mr. Jermyn chartered a motor-launch, and invited a dozen people to fill it. There was to be champagne on the launch. Mrs. Sarah booked three large cars, and made up a party, and it was no undistinguished party either: it included a baronet and a young old major-general. Another score or so of sympathizers had promised to go by road or river. But Mrs. Sarah did not lay too pronounced an emphasis upon

sympathy. She hinted very broadly that there was value at Shelford, and good value.

III

Old Jermyn was writing a letter. He sat the large, square writing-table in the centre of the smoking-room at "Hackett's," and scratched away with a quill pen between pauses that suggested that the letter upon which he was engaged was something of a poser. He had made three attempts and each time a sheet had been crumpled up by a lean hand and dropped in the wastepaper basket beside him. He made nervous, fidgety movements, much to the annoyance of another member who was at work on the other side of the table. What was the matter with J. G.? Why couldn't he get that letter finished, and stop his scratchings and his fidgetings?

After dropping the third crumpled paper ball into the wastepaper basket Jermyn got up, crossed the room, and rang the bell. He stood thinking, and softly tweaking his long nose. Should he write that letter or should he not? What were his motives in writing it? O—confound his motives—he would write it! After all—it was giving the woman a human opening, and if she chose to take it —well and good.

Thompson's brass buttons glittered in the doorway.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring me a glass of sherry, Thompson."

"Yes, sir."

With the glass of sherry beside him on the table old Jermyn attacked for the fourth time. He blew his nose vigorously into a silk handkerchief, a trumpet sound that compelled his vis-à-vis to stare at him truculently. The scratchings recommenced.

"DEAR CLARA—

"Alex and his wife are giving their first show on Saturday week. I have chartered a launch to take a party down to add to the gaiety of the send-off. I shall be delighted if you will join my party. May I say that our appearance will be of the nature of a surprise.

"If you should decide to join us I will let you know the

final arrangements later. We shall probably train or drive to Hampton, and pick up the launch there.

"Sincerely yours.

"JERMYN."

He closed the envelope, purchased a stamp from Thompson, and dropped the letter in the club letter-box. His attitude towards it was from that moment one of "I wonder?" He was giving Clara St. George her chance gracefully to hold out a human hand. But would she do it? Did she wish to do it?

Her reply came to him at the club next day. He read it, standing by one of the windows overlooking Pall Mall. She refused. She gave no reasons for her refusal, and she did not thank him.

Old Jermyn tore up the letter, and crossing the room, deposited the pieces in a wastepaper basket. He walked back to the window, and rattling the keys in his pocket, looked down at the traffic in Pall Mall.

"What a pity," he thought, "that some backs won't bend."

On the Monday of that particular week Alex suddenly became interested in weather reports, though the glass stood at fair and the sun climbed daily out of the east into a cloudless sky. Very early there would be a white mist covering the river and the meadows, and from his bed Alex could watch the gold-green tops of the poplars on the farther bank catching the sun's rays while the river and the meadows remained dew-drenched and grey. He woke very early, and lay on his back—thinking, and waiting for Old George to come and help him dress, and get him into his chair.

His first question would be—"What do you think of the weather, George? Going to last?"

George was a cautious prophet. Did not Henley Regatta always produce rain? Also—when the local committee had fixed the date of the Shelford Flower Show you could prepare to get out your umbrella.

"Looks all right, sir, at present."

"It must be fine on Saturday, George."

"I hope it will be, sir."

It was on the Tuesday morning that Old George asked that most innocent of questions. He was helping Mr. Alex on with his trousers.

"How many people do you expect on Saturday, sir?"

"O!" said Alex, "it will only be the first day, you know. One can't expect——"

But that question of Old George's, and his own vaguely apologetic reply to it, seemed to open before Alex a vista of the absurd and the impossible. It was the beginning of a panic mood, a mood that he tried to conceal most carefully from Kitty. How many people—indeed! Would there be any people? And as his panic mood enlarged itself he began to think of Shelford as an obscure and potty little place miles from anywhere, a place to which no one would come. He shivered at the thought of Shelford's obscurity and its isolation. Vine Cottage and its dance-pavilion and its garden full of tables and its yellow umbrellas seemed to diminish and grow dim, until it was no larger and more convincing than a little reflection seen in the polished bowl of a spoon. The great adventure shrivelled to an absurdity. He and his band! He could hear himself tooting away on his clarinet, like some sedulous fool piping in the middle of a ploughed field. Preposterous optimists——! With all their little capital buried in a garden on the banks of the Thames, while a voice cried in the wilderness—"O, come and dance, do—come and dance."

That was Alex's cry. He would trundle out in his chair, and make a tour of the whole property, and scrutinize all their little stock-in-trade, with an eagerness that tried to convince itself that the adventure was not impertinent and absurd. He became exquisitely worried over seeming omissions and deficiencies. What a pity the wallflowers were over! And those confounded geraniums would not be in bloom. And he couldn't hurry them up. Couldn't Old George put out something or other—pansies——? He grew fussy about the dancing-floor; he spent hours in the place, polishing with his mop. He worried about the band. Supposing either Banks or Summervell fell sick at the last moment, or missed a train, or left the violin in the luggage-rack?

He made sudden panicky discoveries.

"I say, we've forgotten that people might come in cars."

They had, for their eyes had been fixed on the river, so pasteboard was obtained, and Alex printed notices—"Entrance"—"This way to Kitty's"—"Dance Teas," and Old George was instructed to post up these notices on a bracket and on the outer face of the garden door.

Then, as to provisions? How many loaves of bread, and how many cakes?

"I'm going to prepare for two dozen people, boy."

Twenty-four people! It seemed a vast number. Were there twenty-four people in all England who would take it into their heads to drop out of the sky upon the green grass of Vine Cottage? It was unbelievable, and yet Kitty had a calm, go-ahead face. He marvelled at her phlegm, or at what he took to be her phlegm, for he had not divined the fact that Kitty was as worried as he was. She, too, had her own particular secret panic. Yet her little round face seemed to lose none of its glowing solidity. At meals they talked with every appearance of cheerfulness. They played up to each other and to the spirit of the adventure.

"Of course—one can't expect——"

"Not the first day——"

"We've got a wave a flag and make a cheerful noise."

"That's it. We'll keep playing all the afternoon. I'll thump that drum, Kit. But Mrs. Sarah and Corah——"

"There'll be Uncle Jermyn—too——"

He forced a laugh.

"They'll have to go on eating teas all the afternoon if no one else comes. But—of course——"

On the Thursday evening, after supper, she missed him. She had washed up and put the cups and plates away, but instead of helping her as he usually did, he had wheeled his chair out into the garden. She looked out of the window, and saw the afterglow dying along the river and the trees growing black, and the green of the grass changing to grey. The stillness of the sky seemed reflected in the stillness of the river, and as she looked through the glass of the window at the glassy water she felt suddenly and poignantly alone. She was alone. But at the age of five-and-twenty youth will not allow or does not realize that there is a loneliness that is com-

plete and individual. She wanted to snuggle up to some warm human thing, her mate. She felt tired, chilled, a little afraid.

She went out into the garden, calling "Alex." He did not answer her, and in the silence and the stealth of the dusk she too grew silent. She went softly like a sturdy little disembodied spirit—if one can conceive of a disembodied spirit being sturdy. She looked behind the laurel hedge, and along the grassy slope, but it was close under the overhanging blackness of the big chestnut trees that she found him. He was sitting in his chair within a yard of the river, staring at it. Even in the dusk his glance had a strange fixity.

She did not utter a word. She went and knelt down beside the chair, and put her arm round him. She wanted his arm round her. She wanted to feel——

He turned and looked down at her. Their faces were very close in the dusk, and for the first time in his life he divined something of Kitty, of the woman, of that warm courage that burns bravely and then suddenly grows dim. Her eyes were downcast, hidden. And it seemed to him that she was bending under some burden of loneliness, or of some unexpressed and inexpressible distress.

"Kit—I've been thinking——"

And suddenly he put both arms round her head and held it close.

"I've been thinking. It's going to be all right. I don't know why, but it is——"

She pressed her face against his coat.

"O, Alex, O—my dear! We've got each other, haven't we?"

CHAPTER XXX

I

On the morning of the great day Alex woke at five. He had asked to have the blind left up and the curtains undrawn, and sitting up in bed he saw the river shimmering and the poplars painted with sunlight as though some one had streaked them with a mighty brush. The day was fine.

Confound those legs of his! He wanted to be up and about; he would have liked a plunge and a swim; but since such activities were impossible he lay on his back and listened for the first sound of Kitty's movements in the room above. She too, would be early, and Old George was coming at seven instead of at eight to cut the grass and give the garden a final polish. Friday had been a day of excitements, for by the first post a letter had arrived from Mrs. Sarah in which she had advised Kitty to prepare teas for three dozen people. "Better be on the safe side. I'm bringing one or two friends myself."

But busy as that Saturday morning proved it gathered an atmosphere of naïve solemnity, as though someone were going to be married or buried early in the afternoon. Kitty and her girl were busy in the kitchen cutting bread and butter, and arranging plates of cakes, and polishing crockery, and assembling a small regiment of teapots—each pot prepared with a charge of tea. Milk-jugs stood in a row on the kitchen dresser. There were thirty-six plates of cakes, fancy cakes and good plum cake; the whole place seemed to overflow with cake, and the shop counter was pressed into service. You could not arrange dishes on the floor. Old George was mowing and sweeping and trimming verges, and bending down to pull up odd weeds. Alex spent an hour polishing the dance-

floor, and at the end of that operation, finding nothing else to do, he trundled all over the place in his chair looking for stray untidinesses, odd shavings or scraps of paper, or the cigarette-ends distributed at large by the jobbing carpenter.

By twelve o'clock everything was shipshape. The yellow umbrellas were up; a dozen or more tables with white cloths were decorated with cherry-splashed plates and cups and saucers. Kitty had inspected each teaspoon. Old George had gone home to put on his Sunday clothes.

The tension relaxed. The excitement—denied further outward activity—was driven inwards—and looked restlessly out of two pairs of eyes—and disorganized completely two young people's appetite for lunch. Every table and shelf and chair in the cottage appeared to be occupied by dishes of cakes and of bread and butter. Teapots possessed the scullery table, and Kitty was frowning inwardly over the capacity of her kettles to supply sufficient hot water.

The midday meal was perfunctory and disjointed, a fragmentary affair. They ate it in the shop off the top of a packing-case; the meal consisted of sardines, and bread and cheese and tea. Neither Alex nor his wife had any appetite.

He kept glancing at his wrist-watch.

"Those chaps ought to be here."

He was thinking of the musicians, while Kitty was concerned about her kettles.

"I hope there won't be a rush. If Annie gets flustered."

Yet neither of them could believe in the chances of a rush. That sense of haste and of suspense crowded itself into the feeling of emptiness that possessed their two interiors.

At half-past one Kitty rushed up to dress, to change her blue linen for black crêpe and a jade-green apron, black silk stockings, and green shoes. Alex was dressed. He took himself and his chair out into the garden, steering his way past dishes of cake. He arrived in the shade of one of the yellow umbrellas. It felt very hot—somehow, and he kept wiping his hands in a very clean handkerchief. The river was as empty as a road in the suburbs

at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning. Not a boat! But where were Banks and Summervell? Surely the fellows had not missed their train? And Old George ought to be back from his dinner. Confound it—how hot it was!

Then Kitty appeared, looking cool and pink and most astonishingly pretty. She had a vividness—a something, and Alex gave his chair a turn, and looked up at her out of very wide eye.

"I say—you look—ripping——"

She gave him a queer little drifting smile, and touched his cheek with the fingers of her left hand.

"No boats—yet."

"Not one—damn them!"

II

Whole hours seemed to pass before anything in the shape of a boat appeared upon the river. Had the whole of London and Suburbia gone dry?

The first boat that came into view roused them to a tremulous yet restrained excitement. The orchestra had arrived, and was making desultory and musical noises in the pavilion. Kitty stood by Alex's chair. They watched that boat. It was a double sculler, with two female figures in the stern; it came slothfully up past the ferry; the sculling was not very good; two stoutish backs clad in Oxford shirts swung sedulously. One of the scullers wore a floppy white canvas hat; the other was bald.

"O—my God!" said Alex.

The boat had drawn level with Vine Cottage, and two elderly men resting on their sculls stared across the water at "Kitty's." Their faces seemed to express nothing but hot vacancy. The two women——

"O, my God," said Alex again, very softly, "uncles and aunts!"

That boat was a shock to them. It picked up its sculls and went plodding seriously on. It seemed to leave ripples of incipient discouragement behind it, a Noah's ark of a boat.

Kitty rearranged the cups on one of the tables.

"They can't—all—be like that."

Like water-beetles oaring themselves upon the stippled

silver of the river came other boats, boats in which pre-war blazers and gay jumpers and light blouses reintroduced the world to colour. Punts—too—full of red and white and blue cushions, and casual and reclining youth poled lazily along. They came and gazed and passed, though now and again a boat or a punt would seem to pause and falter, and a man and a girl would exchange a word or two. "Hallo—dancing!" But though the lure was dangled, it was neither compelling nor complete. And Kitty stood beside one of her tables under the great plane-tree, and heard Alex's band strike up. Clash—bang! A merry noise. But she looked at those occasional people paddling or poling by, and wished herself a tyrant, a little empress, or a giantess who could reach out a hand and pluck those humans out of their boats and thrust them into the dance-house like chickens into a coop. "Dance, damn you! Dance in my house." Her little firm chin jutted out, and in her eyes was a kind of anger——

She went to the pavilion and stood in the doorway. The orchestra played ragtime furiously, with drummings and clashings. Where was Mrs. Sarah? Where was everybody? And suddenly the music ceased, though she did not realize that it had ceased until she found Alex in his chair beside her. He was pointing; his face was flushed and excited.

"Look, it's coming here—— That launch."

How absurd of her not to have noticed it! But there it was, a very white launch with a gilded prow and a Union Jack floating from the staff at the stern, leaving diverging lines of swell behind it as it made its gradual glide towards Kitty's landing-stage. Someone was standing up in the launch, a man in a dove-grey coat and white flannel trousers, his hat raised above a head of superlative whiteness.

"Uncle Jermyn—! And people—quite a crowd—!"

"The dear!"

Her eyes ceased to look resentfully at the river. She waved.

"I'll go and meet him. Better start up—boy."

"Right-o—rather—I should think so. Dear old Jermyn——"

Kitty had "Dear old Jermyn" in her eyes as she went

down to the landing-stage where Old George was ready with a boat-hook. The launch was full of faces, smiling faces. Mr. Jermyn, still standing, and as much master of the situation as though he were a ship's captain and the launch his barge, made a circular movement with his hat.

"My party—Mrs. Alex St. George. Mrs. Alex St. George—my party."

She gave the whole launch a dispersed smile.

"I'm Kitty—— I'm very glad to see you all. The band's playing."

Hardly had she seen them landed and in progress towards the pavilion, and squeezed old Jermyn's fingers, than Mrs. Sarah appeared from somewhere with a little crowd of followers. Mrs. Sarah was in great spirits. She kissed Kitty, and appeared ready to kiss Mr. Jermyn. "O my dear—a car had a puncture. But here we are. Not all strangers—either. You know Sir Maurice—and General Rideout—I—am—enjoying myself."

It was a little bewildering, but it was splendid, and Kitty—having smiled at everybody, clutched a round tea-tray and a consciousness of her duties, and extricating herself, rushed in to her kettles. It was essential that she should not lose her head or allow the girl Annie to lose hers. Dignity, precision, no rushing about as though the situation had surprised you. She hoped that Annie was not a heavy breather.

"All the kettles——"

Annie had a placid surface. She had assisted at functions, quite creditable functions.

"Two are boiling, miss; the other's on the sing."

"O, splendid!"

"Shall I fill up?"

"Wait. When they begin to sit down at the tables. Get the cakes and the milk and sugar, and the bread and butter out first. O—here's mother."

Mrs. Sarah had removed her hat, and was unfurling a white lace apron.

"I'm on this job, too, poppet. They're dancing—they're dancing already. The band's A1. I pay for all my crowd, you know."

But before she became absorbed in the serving of teas Kitty went down to the dance-house and looked through one of the panels of treillage. The orchestra was in full

cry; about a dozen couples were dancing, and for a moment Kitty had a glimpse of her husband sitting in his chair beside the piano. He was laughing, head thrown back as he played and watched the dancers. The pianist jigged on his stool; the tall fair boy with the violin gave little flicks of the head, and swaggered with his shoulders. Alex, a drumstick in either hand, would lean over and strike a clashing blow upon the cymbals, and laugh, and catch the laughing eyes of the dancers.

She loved him.

He had such an air of triumph. He was so enjoying the show, and his drum and his cymbals. It seemed to delight him to see these people dancing, and dancing as though they enjoyed it, though he himself would never be able to dance. But his youth danced with them, and wished them well. Those flickering drumsticks danced on the ass skin. The clash of the cymbals urged and challenged and applauded. "Go it—you people. Splendid! Life's worth living."

She threw a little unseen kiss to him and hurried back to her tea-tables. She was happy; yet she was two women in one body, and while one of them dealt with teapots and hot-water jugs and plates of bread and butter and gave and accepted gay patter, the other moved with a kind of inward sacramental solemnity. She was the little priestess of the show. The yellow umbrellas glowed. The river seemed to swell proudly past. Under the great plane-tree the shadows lay in a chequer of gold. She saw all her bright tables, and the well-dressed people, and heard the music and the voices. She saw Mrs. Sarah everywhere, and herself as a figure of inward dreaminess, and felt a kind of smooth and drowsy rustling of the leaves of her secret soul. Even when Old George came to her and, impressively whispering, informed her that three other boats had pulled in and that he had sold ten more tickets, the words did not seem real.

III

As old Jermyn wrote in his diary—for he was a Pepysian soul and kept a diary—"Studying life is like trying to study the interior of a room by looking through the keyhole. We all squint through keyholes," and when he

wrote these words he was thinking of Clara St. George. But he did not know that on that particular day Mrs. Clara had stooped to her keyhole. That it showed her other things than she wished to see was neither here nor there. It was a surreptitous keyhole, and she might have been discovered peering through it had not the people on the other side of the door been full of their own affairs.

Mrs. St. George ordered out her car on that Saturday afternoon, and was driven down to Shelford. Her man had orders to park the car under the lime-trees opposite the Ship Inn. Mrs. St. George left her car under the young green foliage and went upon her way, her way being Shelford Lane. She walked as far as Vine Cottage, and saw three empty cars drawn up close to the orchard fence, and three chauffeurs leaning against the fence, and smoking cigarettes. She read the notices posted upon the cottage; she heard sounds of music.

But Shelford Lane offered her no peephole. Vine Cottage and its garden defended itself with a brick wall, and a thick thorn hedge, and the old entrance to Bunt's boat-house had been boarded up. So Mrs. St. George retraced her steps. She did not see herself as Death at the feast—if there was a feast. Her surreptitousness sought to discover the fullness or emptiness of the tables. She had come down in search of a fiasco. But there was the river; she had remembered the river, and on the river her keyhole would be a large one. She turned to the left under the lime-trees and past red may-trees and golden laburnum pendant over old red walls, and found herself at the ferry. A boat to be hired? Assuredly. A man in a dirty sweater had three boats and a punt idly nosing at the landing-stage. The lady would need a boatman? He shouted to a youth who was baling water out of a shabby old black punt.

"'Arry, you're wanted."

Mrs. St. George took to the river. To the youth's question—"Want to go up or down, m'um?" she gave an answer that made it appear that she had no particular prejudices. "O—up—I think." But she did tell the youth not to hurry and to keep well out in the middle of the river, and he—having no interest in anything beyond the receipt of a possible tip at the end of the excursion,

responded to her wishes. He looked either at her knees or over one of his own shoulders. He may have thought her an unusual person in a boat. She did not look like the Thames on a Saturday afternoon. She sat there like a gentlewoman driving down Piccadilly in the days when gentlewomen sat erect, their stays well boned, and with bonnets upon their heads.

The lad did notice that the lady looked somewhat fixedly at Vine Cottage and its garden and its dance-house. Here was a diversion, something to stare at, and he lay slouching for some seconds on his sculls, listening to the music of Kitty's orchestra. He made a remark to the lady, referring to Kitty as "The young woman whose husband was on officer chap who couldn't walk." He added that things seemed a bit gay over there, gayer than Shelford had expected them to be, but the lady made no reply. She sat there as though he had produced no sort of noise that had any meaning for her, and he resumed his sculling. It was very hot on the river, with a silvery glare stretched like a sheet of silk between the green of the trees and fields, and the lady put up a dark blue sunshade and held it so that the lad saw nothing but the curve of her chin.

But she had seen all that Mr. Jermyn St. George would have wished her to see, that gay little garden crowded with bright figures, the white launch and the boats lying by the bank, the yellow umbrellas, the crowded tables, the vivid little dance-house with its movement and its music. Not only was Kitty's window dressed, but her shop was full. And Mrs. St. George's peephole had showed her a miniature brilliant with colour, a green ground stippled with success, a little modern *fête gallante*. Youth triumphant or if not quite triumphant, making a brave show.

She was sculled on through the glare past the towering chestnuts and the meadows beyond where pollarded willows shimmered in the heat, and under her blue sunshade her face had a staring pallor. Her rigidity was complete. She suffered the lad to scull her a quarter of a mile up-stream before telling him to turn. She seemed to sit in the midst of a stiff and stricken silence, and when again she broke that silence the lad had no knowledge of the tremendous effort that it cost her.

"Row close in. I want to see—that dancing."

She had to rend those words out of herself. She sat erect, holding her sunshade so that her face was hidden, but when the boat glided over the green reflection of the chestnut-trees, she raised her sunshade very slightly.

"Stop a moment."

Her voice had a dry breathlessness. She was looking under the blue edge of her sunshade into the interior of Kitty's dance-house. There was no music for the moment. She saw a few girls and men sitting or standing. She saw the piano, the violinist raising his bow, Alex in his wheeled chair, the drum, the yellow halo of the cymbals. And suddenly her son's arms were raised. She saw his upturned laughing face. The sticks fell. Clash—bang! Men and girls glided out——

She kept her sunshade lowered after that. She told the lad to row her back to the ferry. She saw neither Kitty in her green apron busy among the tables, nor the stout figure of Mrs. Sarah—that impossible woman—— She disembarked and paid for her boat, and gave the lad a shilling. She went straight to her car.

"Home."

Over Cardigan Square lay the sloth of a Saturday afternoon when the plane-trees assume a green silence that is almost solid. Houses threw sharp shadows, and overhead a blue sky pearled itself with heat. Mrs. St. George's car came to rest in the midst of this silence. The chauffeur got down and opened the door. She looked at nothing; her blue eyes had a peculiar fixed stare. She crossed the pavement like a stiff figure propelled on invisible wheels. She ascended the steps, and with a rigid deliberation opened her bag and took out her latchkey.

She opened the door and closed it. She stood in the hall. It seemed to her very dark.

IV

It was nine o'clock when the yellow umbrellas were taken in, and the dance-house closed by Mr. Venables, and all the tables cleared. The white launch and the cars had departed Londonwards two hours ago, and the sun had set, and the river was black and still, but gone

was its sense of emptiness. The scullery table was piled high with crockery waiting to be washed.

"We'll leave it to-night," said Kitty.

She sent Annie home. She wanted to be alone with the result of the days endeavours, to clasp her bouquet, to bury her nose in it. And Alex was still out there in his chair, circulating among the tables, and removing table-cloths and carefully folding them. She put her hands to her forehead. She was both tired and beyond being tired; the secret climax of the day throbbed in her; the laughing, kindly crowd had gone and left her the day's consummation.

She went to the door and felt the cool of the dusk, and a freshness as of falling dew.

"Boy——"

"Hallo——!"

"Time for supper. We've earned it."

He came trundling towards her over the grass, his lap full of folded cloths.

"Supper——? O, we'll picnic—— I say—Kit, what a day!"

She ran forward and, meeting his chair, stopped it with her hands on the wheels, and leaning forward, kissed him. There was surprise in her kisses, fragrance, a quality of warmth and of abandonment.

"What a day! And no picnic supper—either."

He looked at her a little breathlessly, divining in her a sudden attack that was more than tenderness. She seemed to emit a glow, to exhale a perfume of sweet surrender. Her glances were both shy and intimate.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Uncle Jermyn left a hamper."

"For us."

"Champagne and iced salmon—— The dear——!"

"What a sportsman! Kit—I'm hungry—I'm——"

"I'm hungry and I'm thirsty. Boy, let's celebrate. They've gone. It's just you and I——"

V

At eleven o'clock that night Vine Cottage showed two lighted windows towards the river, an upper and a lower light, and over the carpet of the upper floor bare feet

pattered softly. Kitty was in her nightdress, a white and filmy thing laced at the elbows and the throat. Two candles were burning on the dressing-table, and a little pile of clothes lay on a chair. She stood for a minute or two at her dressing-table, using a powder puff, but more for the perfume of the powder than for the pearling of her skin. She powdered her arms, slipping back the laced sleeves. She took the stopper from a small cut-glass scent bottle containing Parma Violets, and pouring a drop or two into a hollowed hand, rubbed the scent into her hair. A little lace cap hung on one of the wooden pillars supporting the mirror, and she adjusted the cap upon her honey-coloured head, patting and pulling it with intimate fingers. She slipped her arms into a green chiffon dressing-jacket.

Deliberately she blew out one of the candles and pulled up the blind. The window was open wide. She leaned out with her elbows on the sill like a shy, feline thing rubbing itself softly against the velvet of the night. The night was very dark, but not so dark that she was unable to distinguish the details of her property, the dim river bounding it, the great plane-tree—a towering and restful presence, the white tables, two old fruit trees, a path winding between the lawns, three round flower beds, the compact blackness of the laurel hedge. A creeper, the cottage vine, had pushed young shoots into the opening of the window, picking up the light upon the leaves of a lucid and transparent greenness. Kitty plucked two of the leaves and tucked the stalks under the lace border of her cap.

A gesture, imaginative, prettily pagan! Her taking of the lighted candle was both more symbolical and more purposeful. The upper window grew dark towards the river, but as the little white figure descended the stairs, lighting itself to that other room, its limbs and body might have been seen dimly glowing beneath the texture of the crêpe de Chine.

CHAPTER XXXI

I

NOTHING stands still, and though Kitty was neither a physicist nor a psychologist, she had a feeling that life had to go backwards or forwards, up or down. She had a sense of dimensions, a native appreciation of all that is relative. Your business waxed or waned; your bank balance ebbed and flowed; also, she knew, that important as a bank balance is, there are considerations that transcend it.

Manhood, for instance, and childhood, and the sum of the reactions that make for the state we call happiness. And always you must be chasing or wishing to chase the butterfly on the other side of the hedge, or to possess yourself of apples that are not yours, but might be. There is no standing still. You may pause to get your breath, or to realize your inspiration. You may clasp your love, but the clasping of it may not make it more yours unless you realize that a bosom should give milk.

As the surprising success of their venture became apparent, comparative though it might be, and she counted the shillings and pence, her attention seemed to shift to another problem and to ponder it. She had a pause for quiet breathing. She was able to estimate her husband's incompleteness, his almost dear incompleteness, full of touching and naïve expedients though it was. She had to ask herself the obvious question. Was she to be content with that incompleteness, or to suffer him to be content with it?

But to begin with—regarding the success of "Kitty's." It had its ups and downs during the first few weeks, but like the chart of a rising temperature as the peaks grew less pronounced, the curve joining troughs and peaks

ran at a higher level. No doubt the Sabbatarians would have been shocked, but on each Sabbath evening Kitty and Alex felt moved to gasp and exult and to hug each other. The show was succeeding. Touch wood, but it was! And why? But who could say? No doubt some half a dozen streams of influence had converged to produce the flow. For on four consecutive Saturdays Mr. Jermyn St. George and his party had turned up in a launch. Mrs. Sarah—too—in a car—with Mr. This or Sir Somebody That. The pressure that Mrs. Sarah had been able to exert was surprising. When she took a leap her ripple marks spread far and wide. Corah too and her prospective husband—a brisk fellow earning his fifteen hundred a year—touched other circles. But all these partial impulses would have been of no lasting account had not Kitty's show persuaded the Thames that her show was "it."

For, in certain cliques it became an accepted opinion that "Kitty's" was chic, and therefore the chic thing to do was to take a boat or a car and dance there. The show was a "posh" one, or whatever topical term you chose to apply to it. No doubt there were happy coincidences, a fortunate concatenation of circumstances, but had the fruit lacked bloom and colour no bird would have come to peck at it. Had there been no yellow umbrellas, and indifferent music and a bad floor, Alex might have possessed six paralyzed legs, and youth would have lingered for an afternoon and ruthlessly disposed of him and his bad music. "Poor old chap, but an absolute dud with the drum. No earthly—you know." Youth would have left it at that, and if Alex did not know it, Kitty did. She too was young and she could be ruthless, and she used youth and its selfishness and its little superficial clevernesses to help her show. She knew that certain of the casual young men who came to Shelford were Fortunate Youths, young Solesby for instance who had the sleekest head and the most unruffled self-assurance of any young man about town, and who would let you know what was posh and chic and mignon and what wasn't. He happened to feel interested for a couple of months in a little woman with dark eyes and a devilishly taking head of tawny hair. Kitty was smooth to young Solesby and his clique. She

knew the commercial value of the sort of man who collects women or is collected by them. They asked for something unusual, a dinner served in a cellar with the waiters dressed as sweeps, or a species of Daphne and Chloe show in the country where lambs bleated. They served a purpose.

But chiefly did Kitty rely upon the average man and girl, the suburban people who came and saw and danced, and went home and told their friends: "There's a jolly little place at Shelford." She was wise in the creating of an immediate and happy impression. She would find time to go down to the landing-stage when a boat pulled in, and meet people with a smile and a "Glad to see you." She contrived to create an atmosphere of casual and happy friendliness. Her smile carried. And behind his drum and cymbals, or while twanging his banjo, Alex was no less happy in suggesting irresponsible light laughter. He nodded at people, had a smile for the new-comers. "That's it, enjoy yourselves." Clash, bang! Youth's jazz band would step off with a gaillard and joyous swagger. In those days the melancholy and mooing saxophone had not produced a universal cacophony. And Alex loved his show, and laughed, and people laughed with him.

There came a day in July when the lawns and dance-house were so crowded that Kitty began to wonder how to control her success. There were a dozen cars parked in the lane, and boats lay along the bank like horses packed in a stable.

Mrs. Sarah was down from town. She knew success when she saw it, and how to seize the proper moment for a nice reaction to circumstance.

"Raise your price, poppet."

"But—supposing——"

"Do you know the tale of a man who bought a warehouse full of shirts, and opened a shop, and offered them for sale at five and sixpence a shirt?"

"Haven't heard it."

"He sold some three shirts in a week. Something was wrong, obviously. So he reversed the tickets and marked them at half a guinea. And trade boomed."

So Kitty put up a notice which stated that owing to the crowded success of the show the management felt

itself compelled to raise its prices. In the future the Thé Dansant would cost four shillings.

For a week she was just a little anxious, but Mrs. Sarah's moral of the shirts appeared to apply also to the running of a dance-house on the river. The popularity of "Kitty's" seemed to increase. It became more "posh" than ever.

She laughed, and Alex laughed, and Old George's tips increased. He was making very good money, and had invested thirty shillings in some new and miraculous cure for his wife's chronic rheumatism.

On Monday mornings the management of "Kitty's" would sit down in the kitchen and check its receipts. At the new rate of four shillings the week-end takings were showing an average profit of twelve pounds. During the week they were netting three or four pounds from casual people who danced to the strains of the big gramophone reinforced by a gentler tapping of the drum and cymbals. Three hundred pounds or so for the season. But then Mr. Jermyn was financing the band!

"Not so bad."

They were agreed that it was not so bad, and that the re-opening of the shop would be a superfluous impertinence. Alex was prejudiced against the shop, for Kitty had enough to do.

And there were times when he would wriggle a little in his chair, and though he made no moan about it, Kitty was wise as to those wrigglings.

"You always have to sit, boy."

He smiled.

"I do wish sometimes I had a spare seat."

She commissioned Mrs. Sarah to buy for him the best air cushion that could be bought in London.

II

But in other respects Kitty's husband was less in need of an air cushion. No doubt the conducting of a dance orchestra is not a very distinguished occupation for an ex-public school boy and an Oxford man, and there were plenty of people who agreed with his mother and the suppressionists that Alex had lost caste.

The Archdeacon of Blandchester was one of the deplorers. Man of compromises though he was, he was a great writer of letters, and in the columns of *The Times* or the *Morning Post* he would appeal to the Smythian world to deal with the New Paganism or the New Something or Other by sitting down heavily upon it. He was not unlike that other and more distinguished "Soapy Sam" whom Huxley rent so ruthlessly. He wrote sympathetically to Clara St. George, appealingly to Alex, reprovingly to old Jermyn, for the lights of the dance-house upon the Thames were not to be concealed, and Jermyn had helped to light them. Alex flushed up hotly over the avuncular letter, and uttered youth's cry in the face of the eternal suppressionist—"The old hum-bug!" Mr. Jermyn, jocund of eye, took it upon himself to reply for both of them, and in his most puckish strain.

"My dear Sam,—

"I know that you and your world hold that nothing is sinful provided it is not seen. O, yes—you do—my dear fellow, though you don't allow it, and though the unseen may be concealed under a Bishop's apron. Is it that you object to a young man trying to earn his living by beating a drum on a Sunday, or is it that you object to all drums other than your own particular and private drum——? Etc.——"

But polemics apart, when a man makes a success of some human endeavour, even though it be the teaching of a dog to waltz, or the persuading of a suppressionist to look at life honestly with both eyes, he is better for it, and Alex was the better for the successful beating of his drum. He had his part in the show, un-Smythian though it might be. He sat for hours in a chair and helped to give the world something that it asked for, and his self-respect was most visibly increased. Kitty was aware of his new texture; it showed in his eyes, in the firmer lines of his face. His voice—even—had a happier and a stronger resonance. He was helping to earn money; he had ceased to suggest to himself that he was a poor, parasitical creature with two useless legs.

Yet, such an amelioration was relative. It did not

satisfy the soul of this practical and sturdy little person who had a way of looking ahead and of asking questions. And she was asking Dr. Drake the most searching of questions. Why this—why that? Was it not possible——?

For there were moments when she would look at Alex as a mother looks at a crippled child, and furiously refuse to believe that his paralysis was final. He was so alive. It appeared to her that he had developed amazingly during the last three months. He was more of a man than she had ever known him to be, and, to her, the word man implied a courage that was quiet and inward, patience, good temper, a philosophy that had a quick and whimsical smile. He was facing realities, the realities of their new young world. He was symbolical of youth wounded in the war, raising a stricken but laughing head, and uttering the old cry "Cheerio. Things might be much worse."

But might they not be better?

She watched him trundling about in his chair. He had become an expert in the handling of that chair, and his various ingenuities never failed to rouse in her a feeling of quick tenderness. Seeing him there in the garden she would sometimes feel moved to cry—"Boy—get up and walk. You—can—walk." It was as though her own sturdy vitality yearned to leap into his body and to quicken it and to make it whole.

She pressed Dr. Drake hard.

"Surely—there must be something——"

Drake had been making inquiries as to pensions. It appeared that the authorities might insist upon Alex entering a recognized military hospital, and upon his remaining there for observation and treatment. It might be a question of months—many months. But when the proposal was put to Alex his face crinkled up like a child's.

"I don't want to go, Kit. I'd be miserable. It wouldn't do me any good."

She was very grave.

"Perhaps I ought to let you go."

"I'll go—if you think I ought to."

But she did not want him to go. She had a wisdom of her own, and she pressed Dr. Drake with still more

persistence. He—too—was afraid of realities. He had taken the trouble to motor over to a certain hospital where he had a friend upon the staff. He asked questions. The particular friend was just a little unorthodox. He had realized that the mind of man was—"Like a Chinese puzzle, my dear chap. One of those things one twiddles at or gives a shake to, and something happens. I have had one or two extraordinary results." Dr. Drake wanted to be told. "Well, I've shocked them, staged a mental concussion. And things happened."

So, Dr. Drake stood at the window of Kitty's sitting-room and watched Alex weeding a flower bed with an ingenious contrivance of his own, an old dinner fork lashed to the end of a bamboo cane.

"The question is——?"

Kitty watched Dr. Drake's eyes.

"The question is—just how much is he paralyzed? If it's a mixture of the functional and the organic——"

"Put it into plain English."

The paralysis may be only partial. There is paralysis, and the paralysis that exists may be dominating—suppressing—the part of him that might—walk. Do you take me——?"

"You mean he can't walk, because he thinks he can't walk?"

"Half and half. He thinks the whole of him can't walk—because part of him can't. It's a possibility."

"I want to test it," said she. "And how?"

Dr. Drake fingered his collar and tie.

"Some kind of shock, perhaps. Supplying him with so sudden and urgent a need for walking—that he might—— An emotional shock. Something of that kind."

She was silent.

III

Meanwhile, the "Woman of Cardigan Square" as he called her, had become to Jermyn St. George almost a figure of pathos. He knew that she knew of the success of "Kitty's," comparative and impermanent as that success might be, for he had made it his affair to keep her acquainted with these happenings. Regularly once a week he would emerge from a taxi, and stand waiting with his

back to the big mahogany door, surveying the square which was but one cube in the mosaic of his beloved London. The quality of his welcome never ceased to intrigue him. "We meet like cat and dog," he wrote in his diary, "but like cat and dog who have agreed to respect claws and teeth." Mrs. St. George never made it appear that she was glad to see him. She was, and she wasn't. He came from the enemy's camp, and yet there was for her a curious and contradictory challenge in these meetings. She rather resembled a woman of severe niceness compelling herself to read a novel that was supposed to be unpleasant. Not that old Jermyn was unpleasant to her. They fenced with each other, but with perfect good manners.

Yet she would not unbend.

And old Jermyn would sit there in that room that had been Alex's, and stir his tea, and think——

"Woman—it would be so easy! You have only to utter half a dozen words, and everything would be different, you, your son, your son's wife. As it is—you have lost him. Never will you recover anything but a little part of him—and yet——"

He was sorry for her, quite profoundly sorry, and surprised to find himself so sorry. She did not deserve sympathy; she had behaved like the very worst sort of religious fanatic; she had displayed the qualities of a "Bloody Mary." Yet, in a way, she was as pathetic as that most hateful of Queens, that sour-souled suppressionist, deserted by her husband, surrounded by an odour of burnt flesh. Clara St. George would have been capable of burning and of torturing; she had burnt and tortured; she had been ready to shut up her son in the Iron Virgin of her own egoism. Such women persist, and also—such men. There are priests who would still fire the faggots—if they dared.

But she gave Jermyn the impression of a woman who had suddenly grown old: her eyes had a dry hardness, and her pale skin looked as though it would crack over her nose and cheekbones. Her rigidity remained, but it hung a little wrinkled over a shrunken self-confidence. That she was a very miserable woman sitting erect before a dying fire was as plain to him as the futility of her attitude of no-surrender. Also, she did not or would not

allow herself to realize how crushingly life had defeated her. She might have been one of the bitter Puritan women watching the London crowd howling mad over the return of Charles II; amazed, shocked, scandalized, quite unable to understand that though the suppressionist has his uses, his bones will be thrown out into the charnel house when they have clogged life sufficiently to provoke the eternal and positive reaction. She sat there frozen with obstinacy. She remained wilfully apart while live and wonderful things were happening to her son.

"There shall be no spring but my spring."

Hence she was making for herself a perpetual winter.

Once—only—was he able to provoke her into discussing her attitude to her son's present and his future. It appeared that Alex had sinned against her sacrosanct conventions; he had mixed his classes; he had allowed himself to become involved with the cheap and the vulgar. And such a menage promised to produce the inevitable shabby ending. What else could you expect? When a man became *déclassé* the fly in the web of a little shrewd adventuress? Besides—there was the mother——

Jermyn had to disagree.

"A doctor's widow——"

"From Whitechapel——"

"Still—he was a doctor. And the woman was left high and dry with two daughters, and she had to do something——"

"O—yes—something——"

She tightened up her lips. She would not discuss Mrs. Sarah. The very thought of the woman disturbed her like a bad odour, or some piece of hireling insolence.

"And then—the girl. The whole atmosphere. So hopelessly cheap. I have a right to my prejudices. Prejudices are in the blood. You don't seem to be one of us, Jermyn. You seem to have——"

"Back-slided. I won't force the retort."

She gave a slight twitch of the shoulders.

"So—impossible—the whole business. Besides—there is Melfont. I was taking up Melfont again next year. I can afford it."

He looked at her with a queer, glittering irony. So—Melfont was to have been the ultimate stage, with Alex as the correct son and the country gentleman. He had no

quarrel with Melfont as Melfont, or with the ideal of the English country gentleman. Life had painted a very pleasant and admirable picture in this green England, but it was a fading picture, like some old, sad, dim, loyal portrait of a Cavalier. Moreover, the brisk hot blood and the spleen of the Georgian days had cooled to a negative correctness. If the future was to have its aristocracies, why not from the loins of such little women as Kitty? Melfont was a tradition, and traditions were grassing over.

"Well—why not afford it——?"

She opened her eyes very wide.

"For myself——? O—possibly—— But there could be no—no continuity. I had intended——"

He wanted to say to her—"Why not make the best of it? The best is a great deal better than you will allow. Alex's wife is a plucky and capable little woman. She seems to be just the woman for him." But he did not say these things. If Clara St. George was not capable of saying them to herself—well—they were better left unsaid. Moreover, the war seemed to have opened a chasm, and Melfont St. George's was on the other side of the chasm. It would belong to Clara St. George so long as she lived, and youth asks for something of its own. It demands its own show.

All that he could say to her was—"Well, take up Melfont again. It will give you an interest," but he realized even while he was making the suggestion that Clara St. George could not dissociate Melfont from Alex. She wanted her country house and her country gentleman. She wanted to order both her property and her son just as in the old days she had ordered Melfont and her husband. The situation was impossible. Kitty had made it impossible. And it was Kitty who mattered.

Meanwhile he had remained in correspondence with Mr. Samuel who was still full of deplorings, and urgently declaring that life is a serious business, and that Jermyn appeared to be incapable to taking it seriously. The Archdeacon was willing to recognize the marriage, but he was unwilling to recognize the Sabbath drum, and this product of the New Paganism. These two young people should be removed from Shelford. It was impossible that providence and circumstances would succeed

in removing them. Samuel was convinced that Clara would be willing to provide her son with an allowance upon which Alex and his wife would be able to recover a certain social rightness in some quite country place.

Mr. Jermyn chuckled. Sam was not an out-and-out suppressionist. He must have his cake iced with compromise. But Jermyn, having exercised his puckishness, wrote a last letter, a letter that met with no reply.

"DEAR SAM—

"I believe you are something of an ornithologist. I have just been reading Hudson's 'Birds and Man.' In it he states that the jackdaws at Wells are divided into two clans, the daws who dwell about the cathedral and the daws who dwell in the Ebor Rocks. He quotes the local opinion that a young daw taken as a pet from the Ebor Rocks is a more lively and more intelligent and more amusing bird than a cathedral daw. Can you explain this phenomenon? Surely it is not possible that the odour of sanctity—and the serene atmosphere of a cathedral close can be held responsible for producing a bird of less intelligence——?"

CHAPTER XXXII

I

For some days Kitty carried Dr. Drake's words in her head. "An emotional shock." Or, she saw those words painted upon her consciousness like large black letters upon the white surface of a cinematograph screen, preparing the "house" for dramatic happenings. An emotional shock? But if she was prepared to try so drastic an experiment how and where was it to be staged? On the river, or in her garden? And where upon this most placid summer Thames between the red walls of Hampton and the green spaces of Runneymede was an emotional shock to be sought for?

Her imagination explored all manner of expedients. Should she pretend to be ill, suddenly and acutely ill? And she laughed.

"I—do—set a value on myself!"

But over the making of cakes for her dance teas, or while shaking and cuffing pillows she searched continually for possibilities, some dramatic situation. How and where? Should she tell him——? But no—— That would not be quite fair, nor might it prove——

And suddenly her inspiration came to her. The Vine Cottage punt had been leaking and Mr. Venables had been busy with red lead and a putty knife, and she went down to the river about sunset on a hot August day to assure herself that the punt had ceased to take in water. To her came the shouts of children playing some game in the lane. An intense and horizontal glow lay for a space upon the river and the fields, and upon Shelford's chimney-stacks and roofs and trees. The lawns had a tinge of gold in their greenness. The beds of geranium and lobelia blazed red and blue as though lit by lamps hidden beneath the flowers. In the massive foliage of

the chestnut-trees the light splintered itself into diffused glimmerings. The patterning on the bank of the great plane was mapped out with extraordinary distinctness.

She was staring at the punt. She saw that the floor-boards were dry. As though satisfied her glance lifted and dwelt upon the river, and the river had such a stillness and a brilliancy that it made her think of liquid light. She looked towards the sun, or the half of it—a great, glowing dome rising above the level of the meadows. She was watching the diminishing of this great half circle when the idea came to her.

She gave her head a toss and a shake. Of course! How obvious! She smiled as Mrs Sarah might have smiled.

"I suppose it's cheek—but would anything else——?"

II

She made her plans with characteristic thoroughness. She chose her day—a Tuesday. She told the girl Annie that she could take the day off. On the evening of the Monday she went to see Dr. Drake.

"I want to feel sure—that it would not do him any harm."

For the first time since she had known him she saw Dr. Drake's face lose its expression of imperturbable dustiness. He stared very hard at her. He pressed his lips together.

"I don't think so—it's a brain wave. But you can——?"

"O—yes—I can—— And I shan't have much on."

"I think I'd like to be—about."

"But I shouldn't want you——"

"I realize that. Supposing——"

"Say ten o'clock on Tuesday—to-morrow. The front door will be open, and no one about. You can slip in—and watch. But I don't want you to interfere—unless——"

"O—it's your show, Mrs. St. George. I'll be there—to take off my hat to you in private."

Early on the morning of the Tuesday, before Alex had been lifted from the bed to his chair, she took Old George aside; in fact she took him to look at the punt.

"I want you to be out of the way, George, this morning —about ten o'clock."

Mystified but sympathetic, for he would have attempted to bury himself in one of the geranium beds had she asked him to do so, he expressed a desire to have this state of "out of the wayness" more clearly defined.

"D'you mean you want me to go home, or just to be messing about out o' sight?"

"Out of sight, George. And if you should hear Mr. Alex shouting—don't come rushing out——"

"No—miss."

"At least—not at once. But I'd like you to keep an eye on Mr. Alex——"

"An eye——"

"In case—he tries to do anything dangerous. You'll understand—when you see——"

"About ten o'clock, miss?"

"That's it."

"There's a board in the dance-house floor that wants a touch with the plane. I shall be in there, looking through one of the bits of trellis."

Kitty and her husband breakfasted in the kitchen. She gave him bacon and eggs, and she could have sung a poem over her frying-pan; and saluted that English dish with the humorous fervour of *Punch's* poet.

"Bacon and eggs, masculine eggs!" And eggs rhymed with legs.

She was excited, and determined to appear as calm as the loaf of bread upon the table, but she broke one egg in transferring it from the frying pan to the dish.

"Bother——"

Alex was reaching for the mustard pot, and his face expressed nothing but the healthy satisfaction of a man proposing to enjoy a masculine breakfast.

"All right—I'll take the broken one."

"No, you won't; I did it."

"Toss you for it."

"Don't be silly."

She sat down and began to pour out his tea. She had assumed an air of casual, workaday brightness. She gave her bobbed head a shake.

"O—I say—boy, I'm going to have a shot at poling

the punt this morning. It's absurd—living on the river—and not being able——"

"But I thought you could."

"I'm a duffer—still. I have had one or two tries——"

"When I wasn't looking!"

"Well, you can look this morning. Expect I'll go round and round."

"Don't lose the pole."

"I'll take a paddle with me in case I do. If one can't manage one's own punt——"

Afterwards he helped her to wash up the breakfast things, and then wheeled himself out into the garden with the morning paper tucked in beside him. Kitty had other preparations to make. With sudden matronly foresight she put on her oldest woollen jumper, and a pair of cotton stockings, and shabby white canvas shoes. She laid out a complete change of clothes. She made up the beds. She looked out of her window and saw Alex on one of the lawns, and about four yards from the river's edge, smoking a pipe and reading the paper. Not a boat was to be seen upon the river. The poplars fringing the farther meadows shimmered in the sunlight.

She looked down at her husband with a considering and critical curiosity that was suffused with tenderness. What would be the ultimate significance of this experimental splash? What did she mean to him? Was she of sufficient importance? Would the shock be so instant so convincing, and so powerful that it would prove——? And supposing it proved that he could not move those helpless legs of his, or was not instinctive man enough to move them? O, but if he could he would. Surely?

She appeared in the garden. She called to him casually.

"Any news?"

"Nothing much."

"I'm going off now. I want to see if I can pole across to the other side."

She went along to where the punt was moored, glancing into the dance-house on her way, and meeting Old George's intent blue eyes. She unfastened the punt, stepped into it, and unshipped the pole. Alex's newspaper lay across his knees; he was watching her, and with a toss of the head she pushed the punt out from the bank.

There was very little stream running, and she poled out into deep water.

"Now," she thought—"now!"

She could see his eyes. They watched her attentively, but with no anxious flicker, for no doubt the day's prospect had a placid smoothness, flowing seawards like the river on a sunny August morning. In one hand he held the bowl of his pipe. She fancied that he was rather amused by her amateurish thrustings, and by the devious progress of the punt.

Purposely missing the river bottom with the pole she went over and under with a very creditable splash. Yet even while the sound of her own splash was in her ears she heard a cry. She came up with a shake of the head, and over the crumpled water saw her husband's chair empty, and the white newspaper lying beside it on the grass. He was on his feet within a yard of the river. He seemed to sway. He was shouting and flapping his arms. "George—George, help!"

Her instant exultation was shot through with fear. He might leap in or fall in. She struck out shorewards while the punt went drifting; she called to him:

"Boy—I'm all right—I'm all right."

She swam with all her soul and body towards the green slope, and as his face grew more and more distinct it seemed to assume an expression of staring bewilderment, of gradual surprise. It was as though he was only just realizing that he had walked, that he was on his feet.

"Boy—I'm all right."

And suddenly she saw him sit down abruptly on the grass like a very young child collapsing in the middle of one of its first attempts to toddle. He looked most absurdly astonished. He felt the grass with his hands, and then put them to his head. His eyes stared at her tawny, swimming head.

She reached the shallow water and climbed out dripping, her eyes ashine under her mop of wet hair. She felt like warm air, buoyed up by an immeasurable exultation, even while he was looking at her with a sort of infinite and breathless solemnity.

"Kitty—I've walked——!"

"My dear——"

"O—my God—but did I do it? I—was—scared——"

She knelt down beside him and drew his head against her wet warm body.

"O—my dear——! You did. You must have done."

He was trembling. Both of them were trembling. They did not see Old George putting off in a boat to recover the punt and the pole, and carefully looking in any direction but theirs.

"Kitty—my darling—you're all wet—— Go and change."

"But——"

"You'll catch cold. I—I want to think. I'll just sit here till you come back. Be quick—— I did walk. I must have walked."

She kissed his head, and quickly rose.

"You'll get up and walk, boy, when I come back. O—how—wonderful!"

She ran in. There was sudden moisture in her eyes other than that which came from the wetness of her hair. And as she rushed into the cottage she saw Drake standing in the kitchen doorway; he drew back into the passage but pushed out an abrupt hand.

"Great! You've done it. I saw."

She held his hand for a second, and then fled up the stairs to drag off her wet clothes and slip into dry ones. She was breathlessly hurrying to return to the garden, and to the consummation of an emotional shock, and to convince herself and him that the thing had happened.

III

Glancing from her bedroom window Kitty saw that Alex had not moved. He had remained sitting there on the grass within a yard of the river, and his stillness seemed to suggest fear, a dread lest he should find that the almost miraculous thing could happen but once, and would not happen a second time. Or was he waiting for her?

She ran down the stairs. She had a glimpse of Dr. Drake standing by the window of the sitting-room, and she paused in the doorway and spoke in a whisper.

"You will leave him to me."

His smile was whimsical.

"Of course—— Your show. But I want to see.

Get him up on his feet again at once. It's absolutely—necessary."

As if she did not know!

But had life ever been so thrilling or so full of wise happenings? He heard her coming over the grass, and turning a quick head looked up at her over his shoulder. His forehead showed a pucker of conscious effort, and his eyes had that anxious and wide prominence that had so appealed to her during the war.

"I'm going to try now."

She stood looking down.

"Shall I help?"

"No—please. I want to try and move."

"Of course you can. I'm sure."

Supporting himself with his hands resting on the grass he made his first effort. Almost she could feel him making that effort. The right leg gave a twitch; the foot slid over the grass as the limb bent at the knee. She saw his face flush up, and a look of infinite relief rush into his eyes.

"I can——"

"Splendid! Now—the—other."

But he was less successful with the left leg; it stuck out stiffly, and though he was able to flex the foot on the leg, the limb would not come up.

"Seems stiff—somehow."

He could roll the foot to and fro, and move the toes, and she knelt down, and grasping the leg, flexed the leg slightly, encountering a rigidity, a sense of resistance.

"But you can move it. Not quite so well as the other—perhaps. But you can."

He said suddenly: "I'm going to get up."

She did not offer to help him. She knelt and watched, aware of his intent and purposeful face, understanding that he did not ask for interference even from her. He turned slowly until he was half prone and supporting himself on his arms. He got on one knee—the right knee. His eyes had a stare of preoccupation; they did not see her praying, devoted, maternal little face.

He had difficulty with that stiff leg, but slowly, using his arms, he raised himself till he was crouching, balanced on one foot, and Kitty's hands gripped her skirt, for their impulse was to fly out and help him. She held her

breath. And with a sudden effort he straightened himself, his hands coming to rest upon the right knee so that the arms assisted in the upthrust of his body. He was standing.

"I've done it."

She too rose, but slowly, with the air of a woman rising from prayer.

"You have done it."

He appeared just a little unsteady, but never had she seen his face so determined. It had a set pallor.

"I'm going to walk."

He put out his right foot, and she saw that when he tried to move the left leg he found movement difficult. He had both to swing and to drag it forward with a kind of jerky, circular motion, but he managed to get it forward. His hands were clenched, and she could hear him breathing. She went with him step to step as he walked very slowly and tentatively over the grass.

"Kit—I can."

And suddenly he seemed to falter, and she caught him, but the faltering did not come from a failing of his confidence. It was emotional, the trembling of an overcharged joy, an exultation that felt choked and stifled.

"O—Kit—I can. I'm—not—not—— I shan't be such a beastly drag——"

Old George, who had been looking through one of the dance-house windows, got suddenly down upon his knees.

IV

Ever afterwards they called that day the "Day of Walking." For Alex would do nothing but walk, going up and down the grass, and dragging that stiff leg with a swinging movement, and a slight roll of the body. Hardly could he be persuaded to rest.

"You mustn't do too much."

"I'm not tired, Kit. Come along, I must show Old George."

She had to humour his great happiness and his passion to express it in movement. No longer was he a legless creature, but a man-child setting out to possess a new world, and exulting in it. "O, Kit, I can hardly believe it." She made him lean upon the back of his

wheeled chair and push it before him. "You can rest on it." In turn he humoured her. He pushed the chair before him, leaning some of his weight on it, and talking to her in short and eager sentences. He said that it was difficult for him to realize—— Nor could he understand how it was that he had allowed his legs to assume themselves to be paralyzed. And now—after all these months! He supposed that there was some explanation, and that Dr. Drake could explain it. "By Jove, won't he be astonished." He propelled the wheeled chair along the broad grass path to the dance-house, his head very much in the sunlight.

"Never thought I should walk along here, Kit."

He called to Old George who had remained busy in the dance-house, or pretending to be busy.

"George, come and see something, man."

George came and saw. He had an air of sheepish, staring benignity.

"Well I never, sir——! It's a good business——"

He could say no more. The simpler, warmer-hearted sort of Saxon is an inarticulate creature who is eloquent only with his eyes, or with a few words strung between blunt silences, or with a grab of the hand.

"You won't be needing that chair much more, sir."

And Kitty was even more silent than the men, for her child had walked, and the physical act had for her many implications. She watched him with a kind of devoted, grave intentness. She had a feeling that she was both less hers and more hers, for it was she who had done this thing, though she would never let him know that it had been done with a purpose. She was able to divine the future as a period of new possibilities and readjustments. He would be—in some ways—less intimately and dearly dependent upon her. He would be able to go his own way, or what might appear to be his own way. And yet——

At least she made him come and sit under the shade of the plane-tree, but he asked not to sit in the wheel chair.

"I want to feel that I have done with it—Kitty."

So she carried out a Windsor chair from the kitchen, and planted it firmly, and stood behind to steady it while he made his first attempt at sitting down. The left leg was still the difficulty, sticking out stiffly like a wooden

limb, and compelling him in sitting down to adopt a sideways movement.

"This bally old leg——!"

She touched his cheek lingeringly with her fingers. Never would her grown child be so helpless and the same.

"It's bound to get much better. Boy, I'm going to send off two telegrams."

"Telegrams! Who to?"

"Mother and Mr. Jermyn."

"Kit," said he, "do you know—I feel—that I want to show off!"

V

Mr. Jermyn St. George was in Scotland, growing yet more red and lean upon somebody's grouse moor, but Mrs. Sarah arrived at Shelford by the 3.40 train. Her solidity cast an emphatic shadow on the paved path outside the red brick booking-office. No taxi was to be had. Taxis, like the manners of the multitude, were apt to be lacking during the post-war period, so Mrs. Sarah proceeded to walk. The afternoon was extremely hot. The blue of the sky burned above a dusty and a rather shabby Shelford, a Shelford that needed new paint, and many new window blinds, and new awnings over its shops. The heat hung in a haze over the beeches of Shelford Park. The river shimmered; even the poplars were breathless and still.

Mrs. Sarah, being of a comfortable amplitude—felt the heat, but of what use was the Ship Inn in these days of the bureaucrat and of diluted beer. She persevered. Where there was shade, either of house or tree, she availed herself of it. She perspired. She arrived at Vine Cottage with a flushed face and a moist forehead, but with an air of incorruptible, physical optimism.

Kitty was putting the kettle on the gas stove when she heard Mrs. Sarah's ring. She had had premonitions. She hurried down the passage to open the door, and seeing the round, red, cheerful face under the black hat, felt that life was good business.

Behind the closed door she fell upon her mother. They embraced.

"You dear, you do look hot."

"I—am—hot."

"You walked——?"

"It seems to be a walking day, poppet. When your wire came——"

Kitty pressed her chin against her mother's shoulder.

"It's been a great day. I fell out of the punt—on purpose—but he's not to know that—and when he saw me in the water——"

"He found his legs. Good lad! My dear, it's almost like Armistice Day all over again. I knew—somehow——"

But Kitty had one of her pregnant silences. She held her mother with both hands, and let her head slip a little lower. Had there ever been so solid and satisfying a body as Mrs. Sarah's?

"I know. I've wanted this, and now it's happened—I feel that I've lost something. He's in the garden now—practising walking. One leg is not much good. But he'll be different. It's almost as though I'd seen a child grow up all in a day."

Mrs. Sarah exerted pressure.

"Why—of course—poppet. But when a woman makes a baby or a man—well—it's just as much her business. It's as much your job now as ever—or should be. Have you told his mother?"

"Not yet."

"I would tell her at once."

"I——?"

"Yes, you. Write a letter. I'll post it in town tonight."

CHAPTER XXXIII

I

CLARA ST. GEORGE was a woman who took more pleasure in the receiving of letters than in the reading of them, and who exercised discrimination in the handling of her correspondence. She understood that letters arrived and saluted you as a person of some distinction, as a gentlewoman whose patronage was worthy of record in the world's ledgers. She liked large envelopes, and paper of rich texture, either glossed like ivory or of a fine matted dullness, but tinted note-paper she would not tolerate. A crest on the flap of an envelope gave her the same sense of inward satisfaction as did one of the rings on her fingers. Circulars she regarded as polite attentions from an anonymous commercial world. Appeals from charitable societies made her remember that there were people who could stand hat in hand at the bottom of her steps and wait upon her bounty.

Her morning's mail was never inconsiderable. It would be placed upon her breakfast-table, some two inches to the left of a white plate with a blue border, and before commencing her meal she would take up the pile of letters, circulars, and bills and sort them, arranging them in little groups or hierarchies. She was influenced by the texture of the envelopes. A letter with a crest was given a place apart. The middle-class fry were paraded just beyond the silver toast-rack. Circulars and bills were made to withdraw beyond the Regency salt-cellar and mustard-pot. She opened the more debonair letters first. Circular and bills might be glanced at towards the end of the meal, and relegated at her leisure to her desk or the wastepaper basket.

But on this August morning her normal procedure was altered by a particular envelope of a greyish-blue colour that lay on the top of the pile, an envelope obviously

without breeding or traditions, and originating from some cheap letter-book. The colour damned it. Also, Mrs. St. George happened to recognize her daughter-in-law's handwriting, and her eyes seemed to reflect the chill of that grey-blue paper.

She held the letter poised for a moment. A fried sole was waiting on the silver entrée dish. And the morning sunlight striking aslant across the long and spacious room with all its faded and mellow richness, lit up the portrait of the Waterloo St. George. His red coat blazed, and above it an amused and sardonic face looked down. Woman, woman, yes, but not that sort of woman! Milord would not materialize himself and descend from his picture-frame for the sake of a neo-Georgian gentlewoman.

With a quick thrust of a small table-knife Alex's mother opened the grey-blue envelope. Her hands expressed a superfine fastidiousness as she extracted the sheet, unfolded it, and read.

It was a very short letter.

"DEAR MRS. ST. GEORGE,

"I think you ought to see Alex.

"Yours faithfully,

"KITTY ST. GEORGE."

II

If it is true that we believe that which we wish to believe, then Alex's mother rushed too rapidly to her conclusions, though as a woman of the world she did explore the various possibilities. She ate her breakfast a little more hurriedly than usual, with that letter of Kitty's propped against the milk-jug. She continued to glance at it as though trying to penetrate its inwardness.

Obviously, all was not well with her son, and she was conscious of a little chilly stirring of exultation, but mingled with it were inclinations that were more elemental. Her blue eyes stared. It could not be that the couple were in need of funds, for Kitty's venture had proved provokingly successful, nor did it seem likely that her daughter-in-law was touting for future favours. "I think you ought to see Alex." Ought!

An impertinent word. And yet might it not be a momentous word? Did it not mean that all was not well with Alex, or that Alex's wife had discovered the disadvantages of supporting a helpless husband? The young women of the day were quickly bored. And if Alex was ill——?

That—too—was understandable. Had not Mrs. St. George foreseen the possible denouement? To take a delicate and paralyzed man from his sheltered corner, to plunge him into the thick of cheap excitements, to persuade him to try and do too much? And the shock of sex? Yes, these coarse-fibred women might have been too heavy-handed, too vulgarly clever. Something had happened. Was it not probable that there had been a sudden flaming up of the old trouble, an extension of the paralysis? That war wound, quiescent but unhealed, had flared up afresh, and this piece of grey-blue paper was a fluttering signal of distress.

Had she not foreseen it, and waited for it? A degradation physical and mental. And she sat very still for some minutes, a woman whose possessive passion exulted, while from this very exultation exuded a cold and viscous emotion. Her fingers curved themselves to clutch and to hold. Was it not possible that she might yet recover the helpless body of her son, or at least recover the realization of him, as a victim sacrificed upon the wrack of a coarse young woman's appetite? She could think of it as a tragedy. Yes, and as a tragedy that would leave her standing severely and supremely right, and able to look down like accusing and intervening fate upon these interlopers. She could say—"I knew. See what you have done. Had you but left him with me——"

The cold sparkle of her revived. She was the Clara St. George of a year ago when she rose from her chair to ring the bell. When the maid appeared she found her mistress standing at one of the windows with the sunlight shining upon her hair, a woman who looked taller than her normal self.

"Is Bates downstairs?"

"Yes, madam."

"Tell him to have the car at the door in half an hour."

"Yes, madam."

So sure was she, and so worldly wise in her sureness, that during the drive to Shelford she began to consider the possible urgencies of her son's relapse. She might find him in bed, with a worried and impatient young wife standing aggressively upon the defensive, trying to convince herself and the world that she had done everything for the best. Young women are human, and especially those young women bred in the various Vernor Streets, rapid wenches who ask for quick and material results. Mrs. St. George's cynicism was catholic. She understood that a helpless husband may inspire ennui—and what was marriage but a compromise? She sat and looked at the passing landscape, but without paying any attention to it, and had the trees plucked up their roots and walked she might have remained in self-absorbed unawareness. She was intently gazing upon a picture of her own painting in which a young man lay helplessly upon his back while a resentful and emotional young woman was on the brink of betraying the fact that she had made a very indifferent bargain.

Bates, pulling up the car by Shelford church, was ordered through the speaking-tube to drive down Shelford Lane.

"Vine Cottage. On the right."

She rapped on the glass when the car came level with the garden wall, but she sat and waited for Bates to get down and open the door. She descended. She rang Kitty's bell. If she felt any emotion or curiosity she did not show it. She waited with her back to the door, her eyes very still in an inexorable and fateful face.

The door opened. Mrs. St. George turned very slowly. She saw her son's wife wearing that inevitable blue linen dress, but somehow looking very dewy and glowing. What a complexion the girl had!

She said: "I had your letter this morning. I came at once."

Kitty's eyes seemed to quiver with some inward light. She stood back, and Mrs. St. George passed in as though Kitty and the door were surfaces to be flattened against the wall.

"What—has happened?"

Kitty had closed the door. She had picked up the vibrations of this other woman's voice as she would have

gathered the significance of a stare or a smile. And Mrs. St. George had never looked less smileless.

"If you will come into the sitting-room——"

In the narrow passage with its brown linoleum Kitty held her words. She went first into the shabby but pleasant little room. She pulled back one of the green curtains and stood looking out. A voice behind her said—"My son is ill?"

Kitty turned quickly. Her face seemed to express sudden laughing surprise; her very hair seemed tremulous with a laughter that rose like luminous bubbles from other deeps. But in her eyes there was a solemnity.

"Ill? O—no. If you will look——"

She stood aside from the window rather like an artist who uncovers a picture, or some little priestess withdrawing a curtain. She, too, looked out of the window at her husband who was standing by one of the flower beds.

"Alex can walk."

IV

Mrs. St. George stood and gazed. Her face and figure had an extraordinary immobility as her eyes watched her son walk from one flower-bed to another, helping himself with a stick which he held in his left hand. She saw him bend down and pick off a faded bloom, and his unexpected liveness seemed to paralyze her. Almost she appeared incapable of speech or of movement. Her eyes followed the figure of her son, but her head remained quite still between her shoulders. Her son was walking, and his gait had something of pathos and drollness, suggesting the stiff-legged limp of an injured bird. He moved his arms a good deal as though helping himself with a flutter of wings.

Kitty said: "It happened yesterday morning. I always felt that it would happen. But it's very wonderful."

Mrs. St. George's head moved. It gave a sudden and jerky twist to the right. Her eyes glanced at her daughter-in-law's face, and there was hatred in her eyes. Never had Alex's mother hated her son's wife as she hated her at that moment.

And yet——!

She looked again through the window. Alex had turned to the river. Some very young and playful impulse stirred in him; he was beating the air with his stick; he made an absurd and irresponsible attempt at a dance-step, and the toe of that dragging left foot caught in the grass. For a moment he looked like toppling over.

"O—my dear!"

Kitty's hands went out. She had an air of momentary breathlessness. Then she stood still. She said—

"I thought he was going to fall. Isn't he splendid! I can't keep him still. He's always trying——"

She glanced at Mrs. St. George's face and saw something that astonished her, a sudden blurring of the blue eyes, a wincing of the precise mouth. Kitty had the impression that she was watching a face falling into ruins, a rigid white edifice crumbling, the face of a woman grown suddenly old and almost feeble.

Something caught in Kitty's throat.

"Won't you go out to him?"

She stood and watched Mrs. St. George walk out of the room like a woman who could not distinguish objects very clearly. She brushed against the door. She got out into the passage, and Kitty heard her fumbling at the catch of the garden door. She waited. She saw Alex's mother appear upon the lawn, and then Kitty turned away, but she could not help hearing what those two said to each other.

"O—my dear boy——!"

"Mater——!"

Silence held for a moment, and then Alex's voice was heard again.

"Mater—Kitty did it. She fell out of the punt, and I just found myself on my legs. That's how it happened. Just like that."

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